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White Dominoes

Florence M. Pettee.



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White Dominoes

White Dominoes

By

Florence M. Pettee

Author of

"The Who-Bird,"

"The Land of Perhaps," etc.



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Chicago

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TO
MABEL L. BISHOP

Whose close companionship and rare devotion are
a constant spur and inspiration, this book
is affectionately dedicated.

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White Dominoes

Chapter I

A HAZARDOUS VACATION

Three times Paul Lancaster fretfully tore up the note he had written and swept the bits of paper into the waste-basket. He gnawed at his under lip nervously and tapped on the edge of his great mahogany desk. For a time he stared with unseeing eyes at the sweet-grass basket that held the tattered remnants of the letter he had tried in vain to write, then sprang from his chair and paced back and forth upon the heavy Persian rug that muffled his footsteps and gave a cat-like quality to his stride. The almost foppish nicety of his garb and luxuriousness of his surroundings contrasted strangely with the unrest that marked his manner.

In truth Paul Lancaster's confidence was beginning to fail him at times. To-day was but the culmination of many recent days on which insidious doubts had assailed his self-complacency. Since the hour Uncle Jason had arrived

so unexpectedly from across the continent, Paul Lancaster's mental discomfort had been growing more acute. Uncle Jason was his late father's only brother and Uncle Jason possessed his full share of the Lancaster keenness and insight. Why had he come so unheralded? Was it to ferret out something? What did those keen eyes see and that quick mind comprehend?

Some lurking sense told Paul that the shrewd, twinkling eyes of the stalwart old man had seen several things. He felt that Uncle Jason discerned far more than Paul, luxuriating in the world's estimate of his achievements, really desired. Yet he *was* Paul Lancaster, and why should he worry?

"It must be that the Knowlton affair has been getting on my nerves. Yes, that's it," Paul told himself apologetically. "The work and the gruesomeness of it all have been throwing me into a blue funk. I'm beginning to imagine things."

But deep in Paul Lancaster's inner consciousness, he knew that his readiness to blame the Knowlton murder for his present wrought-up condition was but a sham, self-delusion.

Abruptly he threw himself into his chair again, his restless manner indicative of his men-

tal state. He pulled from a commodious drawer a letter-file. From this he extracted a bundle of letters. Each communication was the expression of admiration at his skill in unraveling some difficult criminal case.

One after another Paul read the letters eagerly as if they possessed the power to soothe his restless nerves. There was something in his manner which savored of apprehension, yet revealed an almost childlike anxiety to banish by the plaudits of his fellow men the something which he was coming to fear. *For Paul Lancaster did fear something.* The very elusive quality of his uneasiness perturbed him frequently. Yet each time the little god of egotism rallied his self-esteem and brought back the calm of self-assurance to his bearing.

Slowly he brought out a fourth sheet of paper. With his lips thinned to a straight line he took up his fountain-pen. But his hand paused in mid-air as the door swung swiftly open and his twin sister Lorraine entered. She nodded brightly, but abstractedly, as though her mind were busy with some problem in which Paul had no part. Paul's hand remained raised, forgotten; his wide eyes gazed at her as if she were the embodiment of some expected apparition.

Wholly unconscious of his strained regard, Lorraine slipped into the chair before her own plain oak desk in the opposite corner and quietly took up her work.

In appearance Lorraine Lancaster was strikingly unusual. While she was slight and of medium height, her head with its crown of chestnut hair was regally set upon her graceful shoulders. Her eyes were very dark, mystery-loving, and her features as finely patrician as generations of proud Lancasters could make them. To the ordinary observer, she and Paul were amazingly alike in height, features and expression. Only a portrait-painter, or rather a miniature-painter, would have detected the slight difference in Paul's expression. Was it the faintest suggestion of looseness about the mouth, of coming flabbiness in the features?

"Why, Paul!" Lorraine's clear voice exclaimed a few moments later.

This ejaculation had been occasioned by the abrupt departure of her brother. Her sensitive nerves appraised his hasty exit at its true value; he had left as though he fled something. And Paul had been growing more distraught daily!

Lorraine Lancaster knew that something unusual was in the air. That subtle sixth sense of hers warned her. She gazed speculatively

around the handsomely appointed room which served as a commodious office in the family residence. What curious cases had been untangled within those walls!

. . . There was the Graham murder, when Graham père had been found slumped in his chair, his face a gruesome green. And Rudolph Graham had consulted Paul, haltingly stating the bare facts of the extraordinary affair, as he paced that oriental rug. . . . The beautifully carved bear nut-cracker from Switzerland had been the important clue in the Pennington poisoning. Pennington's ne'er-do-well nephew had actually ground his kaufu berries in it. It was Lorraine who had discovered the microscopic grain in the apparently harmless nut-cracker. . . . And the magnificent samovar in the corner came from that sinister affair on Long Island. . . . Article after article, oriental, occidental, and always unusual, cluttered the corners of the famous workshop. Paul declared that they whetted his abilities to a razor edge. But that was Paul's imagination.

Lorraine's wandering thoughts were suddenly interrupted. An imposing, dignified old gentleman with a mane of white hair stood at her elbow. He glanced down at her quizzically, but very kindly. His big voice boomed.

“What’s the ’Raine girl thinking — or is she plotting, as usual? Where is Paul?”

“Paul is out on business, Uncle Jason,” answered Lorraine, glancing toward the window.

The tall, white-haired man smiled enigmatically.

“‘Aye, there’s the rub!’” he quoted.

“Meaning what?”

Jason Lancaster seated himself, dangling one leg over the other awkwardly.

“I’m a Lancaster, and so are you,” he drawled slowly. “Paul — well, we’ll leave him out. I’m an old man, but my years and my eyes have taught me one thing; I can read people. And I’ve come here to-day to read my niece a real, great-uncle lecture. — ’Raine,” his manner changed suddenly, “you’re a fool! It’s nowise fair for you to do all the brain work while Paul casually takes the credit. — No, not a word! I tell you I *know*. Paul’s a molly-coddle, with a wishbone for a spine —”

“Paul has done very well in five years, Uncle Jason, as any one will tell you.” The girl laughed lightly, but it was more in bravado than in the conviction of her brother’s success.

“*Paul* has done well, you say? *You* are the wonder, although Paul treats you as though you were less than the office furniture. The very

smugness of his satisfaction in what he thinks he has done disgusts me. It's all 'I' with him. Does he ever say 'we'? — What he needs is a big jolt right now. His selfishness is — is colossal. And you've no right to hide yourself behind your desk — no right, I say. You're spoiling him. — He's as unlike you as brass is unlike gold. And " — here Uncle Jason reached his climax — "he has the fallacy of the Bakers, drat them! He's a wee bit too fond of investments."

Lorraine's beautifully curved lips whitened suddenly. Was her old uncle a wizard? How had he divined that new worry? But she said nothing. She could not try to deceive this kindly disposed old soul.

Jason Lancaster rose, towering above the girl beside him. "I guess that's all now. But mull over what I've said. You know it's true."

The girl at the desk fell into a reverie, her chin cupped in her palm. Her mind swept in retrospect over five years. In her twin brother's meteoric rise as detective extraordinary, she had played a considerable part — how considerable only she herself realized. The world — his world, so full of the uncanny, the criminal side of life — had no suspicion of the real motivating force behind his enviable career. No one,

for an instant, thought that a slip of a girl, presumably his private secretary, was the real solver of mysteries.

Lorraine's intense interest in crime-detection was the natural outgrowth of many years of study. Even as a child, she had possessed an unusual sense of essentials, keen powers of induction and deduction. Paul's quick memory and ready speech had early enabled him to reflect Lorraine's ability, as they always studied together. Even at college, he made a creditable showing by adopting with avidity the conclusions of her logical mind. Psychology in particular fascinated Lorraine and her research work had been decidedly brilliant. After college their father had permitted them some time abroad. While Lorraine spent many hours in certain continental libraries and obtained an even firmer grasp of the science of deduction, Paul haunted the boulevards and cafes. A clever French farce had interested him in the possibilities of disguise. So he tried out some personal experiences with great enthusiasm and no little success. He was a good mimic, and he could reflect personality remarkably well. The way he continually voiced Lorraine's ideas as his own proved that!

Mr. Lancaster's death and the dwindling

family resources completely changed their prospects. While going through her father's papers, Lorraine had noted a slight discrepancy. By following it up, she saved the estate several hundred dollars. Paul told the family lawyer of *their* investigations. The kindly old man, realizing their straitened circumstances, outlined a little matter which had been perplexing him. Straightway Paul carried the details to Lorraine who eventually arrived at the correct solution. The old lawyer was delighted and promptly wrote Paul a check. Laughingly he suggested that the young fellow enter the mystery-solving business. This Paul decided to do, after consulting with Lorraine, who approved the idea instantly. She loved a mystery and suggested that they work together. Pleased by their first success the lawyer secured other work for them. Gradually more difficult matters were brought to their attention. Now, after five years, Paul Lancaster was famous. He was hailed the youngest and most brilliant solver of mysteries on the coast. And the edge of a continent sponsors many a great metropolis.

Strange how quickly public opinion had pigeon-holed Lorraine as a close-mouthed office-machine, nothing more! The public had decided that the Lancaster brilliancy had fallen entirely

to the son of the house rather than to the daughter. For Paul was clever, pleasant, and a fluent conversationalist. The girl behind the oak desk had done the real thinking and Paul had no more than carried out her marvelous suggestions. Strangely enough, as time passed and his fame grew, he had gradually come to believe himself all that his admirers proclaimed him. He, seemingly at least, had decided that all the credit was his, the result of his own ingenuity. Whether he even realized the part Lorraine played in their achievements his sister never could decide to her own satisfaction.

A little while after her uncle's departure Paul sauntered jauntily back. Whatever had disturbed his equanimity was gone temporarily. His face no longer showed those harassed and fretted lines. And no mental stress could ever cause him to forget the minutest detail of his appearance. He was the personification of smartness as he greeted his sister.

"Anything come up?" he asked.

"Nothing." Lorraine's voice was expressionless.

"Well," observed Paul, strolling over to his desk, "I've tied up this Knowlton affair pretty effectively. And I'm — tired. I don't mind telling you, Lorraine, that it has taxed my

powers. It seemed more like a poser than even the disappearance of Dan Swift two years ago. I'm worn to a frazzle, grinding away as I have, ferreting out this thing that blocked them all. Smithers couldn't have come near a guess. He's rather clever too."

Lorraine smiled suddenly, then sobered quickly. Paul's blind self-confidence had never been more apparent. And his arduous mental efforts had "tired him!" What a funny, unconscious mass of masculine delusions he was! She wondered if Uncle Jason's words had colored her estimate of her brother.

"Yes, the constant strain of mystery-solving has certainly made me dog-tired," reiterated Paul.

"Tired?" Uncle Jason echoed from the door.

Lorraine jumped. "Did you come through the keyhole?"

He shook his head. Glancing at his nephew from under his heavy brows, he slowly entered the room. Paul, busily sorting an imposing stack of papers, looked up slowly.

"Yes, Uncle Jason, this strenuous life is fatiguing." He sighed heavily and his voice was grave.

Jason Lancaster stared at him, shaking his head soberly.

Paul mistook this motion. "Marshall said that the whole force couldn't have pulled this thing through. Naturally I'm fagged."

"Er-er, naturally," echoed Uncle Jason dryly. "I've been thinking, Paul," he went on, "that what you need is a rest from all this heavy thinking you are putting over here. Oh, I've heard how they all say that you are the biggest detective hereabouts — that your one mind can solve what no other ten minds can. And I can just about imagine what the strain of such a reputation must be."

Lorraine was watching her uncle sharply, but Paul drank in what he said thirstily.

"So," went on the old man, "I have a plan and it is a good one. You've pulled through big things enough in the last few months to earn you a vacation. The dull months are at hand. Nothing very difficult is likely to come up, is there? Couldn't Lorraine here manage any of these simple little things? You come back with me and get a good change. Drop all this brain-squirring stunt for a time. What do you say?"

Lorraine looked out of the window, but she listened intently.

Paul caught at the suggestion eagerly. For days he had been like a squirrel in a cage, vainly seeking some way to escape for a time the subtle

fears that haunted him. And here was Uncle Jason with a most acceptable proposal!

He rose impulsively, his head flung back. His eyes danced as he held out his hand. "That sounds jolly, Uncle Jason. I've been in the harness for five years, and I have done well." He tried to make his voice apologetic, but with scant success. "Of course, if I had any idea that anything important would come up, I wouldn't go. But Lorraine can answer my letters and look after all the routine things."

He paused suddenly. "Jove, I never thought of that!" he exclaimed.

"What?" demanded Uncle Jason.

"It is rather a staggering thought," answered Paul. "Suppose — just suppose, that the crooks should read that I had gone on a vacation? What then?"

Jason Lancaster cleared his throat, but said nothing.

"It's — it's the dickens of an idea," went on Paul, nervously. "It might mean a wave of crime."

Uncle Jason grinned behind his hand, but only Lorraine noticed it.

"And," continued Paul, "Smithers would be the only man the chief could call in. He would get all my hard-won chances."

Lorraine spoke swiftly. "Listen, Paul," she said. "Uncle Jason is right. You do need — to get away. Yet it might not be wise for your absence to become known. Don't let that worry you. I'll attend to everything."

"How?"

"Your correspondence is easy enough, and I don't expect much else. I could answer your 'phone calls, say you had a severe cold and take all messages. Again, I don't think there will be anything that I can't handle from the desk here."

"No," replied Paul complacently, "as long as it is not known that I am away from the job, I have few fears. Lorraine is very helpful, really," he told Uncle Jason, "and she's ingenious."

"Um-hum," mumbled the older man.

Paul put his hands over his head and stretched luxuriously. Undisguised relief swept over his features. "My, but it will be good to be free from care!" he said sententiously.

"How soon can you leave?" inquired Uncle Jason. "The sooner, the better, so far as I'm concerned."

"What do you say, Lorraine?" submitted Paul.

"To-morrow," declared Lorraine, decisively.

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There was a hint of command, of super-efficiency in that answer which told Jason Lancaster much. Was she, too, anticipating a vacation?

But Lorraine Lancaster had no idea of what her vacation was to be!

Chapter II

THE RED HAISED WOMAN

At five-thirty, the morning after Paul Lancaster had surreptitiously gone West, Jasper, the butler of the Hartman residence, began his customary duties. In the leisurely fashion which is fitting to such a dignitary, he opened the rooms in the rear of the spacious mansion. Through the Venetian windows of the dark wainscotted dining-room, he stepped out upon the veranda which extended around three sides of the house. He drank in the fresh morning air, his eyes sweeping the magnificent stretch of lawn with its dark green hedge. Ambling around the veranda slowly, he picked up a frond of a fern in one of the big bronze jars standing beside the wide entrance to the main hall. This entrance, at the front of the house, was flanked by the great drawing-room on the right and the huge library on the left.

A slight frown wrinkled Jasper's forehead. The broken frond from the perfect fern annoyed the punctilious butler. He noticed like-

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wise three or four bits of green which led towards one of the two library windows, also with Venetian blinds. Methodically he picked them up as he walked along. The blind nearest the hedge was ajar. Jasper stared in amazement. He had surely locked it the night before!

As he swung back the blinds, his eyes bulged from their sockets. He gazed as if hypnotized at the window; a circle of glass about five inches in diameter had been cut out of the pane and the window itself was unlocked. Jasper put his arm through the hole to assure himself of this fact and then pushed up the sash. He stepped into the dimly lighted room and stopped with a backward jerk. While the clock marked ten seconds he stood and stared. Then he leaped to the electric button beside the door and pushed it with a shaking finger.

Near the carved library table Doris Hartman lay in a great leather chair, her body rigid. Her gay colored Japanese kimona contrasted startlingly with the somber richness of the room. Her face was pressed against the leather cushions and her outstretched arms, stiffly shielding her face, were tied securely to the massive chair back above her head. Her feet were lashed to the heavy posts of the chair and other cords bound her about the waist and knees.

Gasping in his excitement Jasper nerved himself to touch the girl with a trembling hand. His heart gave a jump as he realized she was alive; then he saw her eyelids flutter and her shoulders heave. As he whipped out his knife and hastily began to cut the cords, two servants hurried into the room.

They stopped abruptly at the threshold, aghast at the amazing sight.

"Sarah," snapped the butler, "get Miss Vesta and Mr. George — Help me here, Marie."

Together they released the helpless girl. Her mouth was stuffed with cotton and securely gagged. Miss Hartman was conscious though a nauseating odor of chloroform was noticeable. She watched them dumbly as they freed her and carried her to the big leather couch in the corner, propping her up with pillows. Several times she tried spasmodically to speak, but the cords of her throat seemed paralyzed.

In a few minutes her brother and sister, white-faced and alarmed, came into the room. The wide-eyed cook followed. Doris Hartman began to speak in a broken whisper.

"The — the woman in white — the red-haired woman —" she said, her voice like some fantastic echo from a nightmare.

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George was the first to question her. "Are — are you hurt?" he gasped. "Jasper, 'phone for Dr. Clemming."

Doris shook her head decidedly. "No — no. Just — stiff with fright — a bit wobbly and sick from the stuff. And my ankles and wrists —"

Vesta Hartman dispatched the maids for arnica, alcohol and other household first aids. Then she began to massage the stiff form.

"For Heaven's sake," burst out George, "what does it all mean?"

The group about the girl stared at her as if fascinated, unable to take their eyes from her white face.

"The — the red-haired woman," Doris repeated. "I went to sleep in the big chair. It was hot and I couldn't sleep upstairs — came down — tried to read — became sleepy. No one knew I left my room — house silent —"

The listening group seemed scarcely to breathe.

"I was aroused by something. Before me — almost touching me — s-tood a tall woman in white — even her hands. Her face was covered by a white mask. She was hatless — her masses of red hair attracted my attention. Before I could utter a word — or even think — she

leaped at me, then crowded some vile-smelling stuff in my mouth. Her wrists were like steel bands, they were so strong. She turned my face over roughly and began to bind me to the chair. I must have lost consciousness, for when I opened my eyes the first light of dawn was creeping into the room. My head was pounding furiously. I felt ill, I ached all over. After what seemed hours, I heard the window go up, steps in the room. Then Jasper stood staring at me."

She sank back exhausted amid a murmur of sympathetic exclamations.

A half suppressed cry from Vesta suddenly claimed the attention of the little group. They looked quickly about them.

The room presented an amazing spectacle. The glass doors in the ornate bookcases about the room stood open and here and there books sprawled on the floor as though tossed by ruthless fingers.

Vesta picked up a book near by. Its rich leather binding had been slit viciously from top to bottom. Her companions, galvanized into action by this new development, hastily picked up the other books.

In every case, the handsome leather back had been gashed to its inmost binding, then tossed

aside. Within the opened doors the shelves too presented a curious sight. Here and there, with painstaking deviltry, leather bound volumes had been slashed in the same weird way.

Vesta's hushed voice stopped the ominous quest.

"W — what does it all mean? Do you suppose the house has been robbed?"

With a few quick words George dispatched Jasper and the cook to investigate the other rooms.

"Something has to be done," he blustered. "And Mother mustn't know a thing about it — she's far too frail."

"But you know she insists upon her daily paper," reminded Vesta, "and if you notify the police —"

Her brother stared at her and at Doris. Then his gaze wandered restlessly about the havoc of the room. He shook his head perplexedly.

Doris' voice, a bit stronger, arrested them.

"We — we can't tell the police," she said. "We can't let this leak out of the house. Mother mustn't know. Yet — yet we ought to get at the bottom of the thing. Such a criminal should be run down before some one is — killed by an overdose of chloroform —"

The others listened silently.

"I — I," faltered Doris, "you mustn't laugh, but I want a private investigator. Some one with brains and a close mouth."

"Paul Lancaster," her brother and sister chorused.

The girl nodded.

Jasper entered. "Can't find anything amiss, sir."

"Then it is all the more dangerous," said Vesta. "If there were some overt motive like robbery — or — or something —" her voice trailed off.

"I'll call up Lancaster," declared George, turning from the room.

He was soon back. "Just our luck," he growled. "Miss Lancaster answered. Her brother is sick in bed. Doctor's orders. I told her I would come over and make it easy for him. She declared it was impossible. She suggested, however, that she could come over here, get the facts, inspect the room, and take the matter up with him the moment he is able. Just our luck! Imagine a girl getting the necessary data! Why, she'd bungle everything!"

Doris smiled suddenly. She spoke slowly. "That certainly does solve it to my liking! I was dreading the interview, and it will be much easier to tell it to a girl. Besides I want to go

upstairs and crawl into bed. Have her come, by all means."

George frowned.

Then Vesta spoke up. "I know of Miss Lancaster. She's very nice, a thorough lady — and everything."

"That won't prevent her bungling," objected George.

"Do you suppose Paul Lancaster would let her come if she were not capable? You know she works for him anyway," added Vesta.

Doris was becoming exhausted. Her voice was petulant and domineering.

"I'll talk to nobody but Miss Lancaster," she affirmed.

George looked at the square angle of her chin. Then he turned and went slowly to the phone again.

With the assistance of the maid and her sister, Doris limped to her own room and was helped to bed.

* * * * *

At seven o'clock, long before leasurely, aristocratic Southlake Park was astir, a long brown roadster stopped in the broad driveway that curved up to the Hartman residence. A girlish figure in brown with a close-fitting motor bonnet touched the bell. A stolid Jasper opened

the door immediately and escorted her up the broad stairs.

Vesta Hartman greeted her at the top.

"Doris is asleep," she whispered, "but I can tell you what happened."

Lorraine Lancaster mentally filed away the fact that Doris was the one most concerned. The insistent message over the 'phone had told her nothing except that Paul's presence was needed.

"Very well," her low voice answered. "Tell me the facts, please."

Vesta took her into an upstairs den, relieving her of her hat and motor-coat. Her admiring glance noted the chic silk gauntlets and the soft brown gown with its unmistakable marks of a skilled modiste. She saw the visitor's finely shaped hands which somehow impressed her with their capability. She approved of the way the soft chestnut hair waved above a face of inexplicable charm.

Vesta told her story without embellishment. Doris' apparent escape from serious injury had calmed her.

"Ask Jasper here, please," requested Lorraine the moment that Vesta finished telling her story.

The dignified butler entered.

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"Sit down," directed Lorraine. "Tell me your experience from the beginning."

He related the incidents connectedly enough.

"Why didn't you lock the blind of the library window nearest the hedge last night?" Lorraine inquired.

Jasper's face whitened a shade. "I — I did, Miss," he stammered.

"What time did you lock it?"

Jasper studied the rug carefully. "It must have been at eleven, Miss. I begin to lock up at ten-thirty, ending with the library. It usually takes just about half an hour."

"There was no one in the library?"

"No, Miss."

"Did you note anything outside the house?"

"No, Miss."

"That is all for the present. Thank you."

After he had left, Lorraine turned to Vesta with the question:

"How long has Jasper been with you?"

"Ten years."

"What time did your sister go down to the library?"

"She didn't say."

"Let us go downstairs now. I wanted a few facts before I entered the room. I am glad you locked the door."

Vesta stared at her in astonishment. "How did you know?"

"From the shape of the weight in your blouse pocket. As I came up the stairs, I naturally saw the closed library door — it was the only one not open. I also noticed the knob and the fittings of burnished copper. The Japanese silk pocket of your waist is bulging and shows a coppery tone."

Vesta smiled as she pulled out a squatty copper key and passed it over.

Lorraine locked the door behind them when they entered the library. Paying no attention to the disarray in the room, she went directly to the window and examined the clean-cut five inch circle in the glass.

"A professional job," mused Lorraine. "Glass cut, then neatly and noiselessly pulled out by the regulation rubber suction-cap. Has the piece of glass been found?"

"Why — er — we haven't looked for that," admitted Vesta.

Lorraine threw up the window and stepped out. She focussed her attention upon the hook which ordinarily fastened the long blind. From one of the folds of her dress she brought out a tiny lens, its back and face protected by hard rubber cases. She studied the hook carefully.

Vesta, fascinated, crept close and looked at it with its japanning worn and weather-beaten.

Then Lorraine stooped down and examined the piazza floor from the window to the jardiniere. She next inspected the short stretch of lawn from the step to the thick hedge, using her microscope the while. From the hedge, she untangled several black threads. These she examined carefully and put away in a small envelope in the back of her little brown book.

"Problem No. 1!" she mused, as she jotted down something in the little book.

"Problem No. 1?" echoed Vesta Hartman. "Why it is all problems!"

"Oh, no," Lorraine laughed musically. "It has some self-evident facts. This case interests me. Now for the room itself."

The slight brown-robed figure darted about like a humming-bird. Now she fluttered over the chair, adding a sample of the cord to her bits of black; now she lingered about the table, examining all the volumes. She next began a systematic inspection of the slashed books, and last of all she went through all the cases. Finally, she turned to the big eyes of Vesta Hartman.

"A woman in white, even to gloves and mask, with tremendously strong wrists — mark that

thing, please — and brilliant red hair, attacks your sister. With her rendered helpless, she turns her entire attention to the contests of this one room. With a knife that she evidently brought with her, she methodically, mercilessly, rips open the backs of some of your most handsomely bound books.”

Lorraine paused as her gaze swept the room. “Has any one particular thing about this uncanny affair impressed you, Miss Hartman?”

“Why,— er — no, what do you mean?” was the confused reply.

One expressive hand pointed to the havoc all about them. “*The red-haired woman has slashed only the red-bound books,*” Lorraine told her.

Chapter III

THE DRIFT HOUSE MYSTERY

Awake at last, Doris Hartman rested propped up in bed. Sleep had restored some of her normal color. Her bandaged wrists and ankles seemed less painful.

"I know that I came down the main staircase just after quarter to eleven," she affirmed. "I noticed the clock on my mantel as I was slipping on my kimona."

Lorraine glanced quickly at the dainty Dresden clock, then pushed back her soft sleeve, disclosing a small platinum wrist-watch.

"Then you saw Jasper lock up the library?" she inquired casually.

"No," emphatically, "and I read till long after eleven."

"How do you know it was long after eleven?"

"Because I heard the big clock in the hall strike several quarters before I fell asleep."

Lorraine turned to Vesta. "Will you please 'phone down to Jasper and ask him to give you

the exact time by his watch. Tell him Miss Doris' clock has stopped."

While Vesta was locating the butler, Lorraine made a few entries in her book.

"Yes," Vesta was saying, "the exact time, please, Jasper. Our clock has stopped." There was a pause. "Eight seventeen," she repeated distinctly. "Thank you."

Three pairs of eyes turned to the clock on the mantel. Its hands stood exactly at eight!

"Since your clock is evidently seventeen minutes slow, Jasper probably locked the library just before you came down. And doubtless he locked the blind just as he said. The little bright scars visible on the hook of the blind through my microscope tell me of the recent use of a sharp instrument. The hook was probably unlocked again by your strange visitor. Another professional touch."

"But a woman!" objected Vesta.

"Unusual, but not impossible," was the reply of Lorraine.

"What was she after?"

"That," admitted Lorraine, "I can not say now. Did this woman in white carry in her hands all the rope she used?"

"I didn't see it," confessed Doris. "She looked just like a white wraith. Seems as

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though I would have noted that hemp cord against her spotless white."

"Not necessarily," Lorraine answered, adding another note to her book. "Did you notice her hands particularly?"

"How could I?" retorted the girl. "She wore white gloves."

"I meant the gloves."

"They were white kid," said Doris.

"Were her hands large?"

"I — I don't remember, but they were frightfully strong."

"What kind of a dress did she wear?"

"Just white and filmy is all I can tell."

"Did the mask cover the ears?"

"Yes."

"Hum," mused Lorraine, scribbling away. "Point No. 3 indicating professional knowledge."

"Meaning?" queried Vesta.

"Any phrenological student or any expert in sociology — a physician even — will corroborate this fact, that next to finger-prints the ear is the most characteristic feature for identification. Now, either this intruder had distinguishing ears or she is thoroughly versed in their importance as evidence in an identification. Are you sure her hair didn't cover her ears?"

"N-n-no-o-o," admitted Doris. "I'm sorry, but I was too dazed to note anything clearly. I had merely a snapshot glimpse of her."

"Never mind," soothed Lorraine, writing away in her book.

Doris watched her with interest. "You're delightfully mysterious and—and encouraging," she smiled. "I'm sure you have found something."

Lorraine looked past her, choosing her words carefully.

"That's where you are wrong. It is true that I have three theories about your amazing visitor, but as yet, these are only theories. Meanwhile, may I interview the other members of your household?"

"Certainly," responded Vesta, "with the exception of our mother. She is an invalid and we are keeping the whole occurrence from her."

"A nervous ailment?" queried Lorraine.

"Yes, periodic attacks of nervous prostration and insomnia."

Lorraine sat very quietly thinking as the others watched her. Arousing herself from her abstraction with an effort, she merely said, "Very well."

An hour later Vesta accompanied Lorraine to the roadster.

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“Yes,” she said, “it will be easy to keep the library locked for a day or two. And, oh, I hope that your brother will be able to find the solution to the riddle. Until he does, we shall not rest easy for fear that the terrible thing will recur — perhaps — perhaps something even more terrible ——.”

Lorraine smiled cheerfully. “Don’t pay midnight visits to your library then! Besides, ‘Lightning never strikes twice in the same place!’”

“That’s an exploded theory and an awful bromide,” Vesta’s voice was more teasing than impudent.

Lorraine shrugged her shoulders. “One question more,” she said. “I know your father was a famous importer of oriental goods. He has been dead a year, has he not?”

“Yes.”

“Naturally he dealt with many foreign houses. Do you happen to know if he included Italian and Hindoo firms in his list?”

“Why, yes, of course he did. He had some of the rarest Italian tapestries in America. And his collection of imported curios from Hindoo shrines was not to be duplicated outside of museums.”

“Your brother is now head of the firm?”

“ Together with our uncle, who has always been associated with father in the business.”

“ Then,” continued Lorraine, “ ask this question the moment your brother comes home. Ask him if perchance Hartman & Co. hold, either in their warehouses, show-room, or anywhere, any memento sacred to Mohammedanism. Call up my brother’s office and answer merely ‘ Yes ’ or ‘ No. ’ If it is ‘ Yes, ’ send me a note giving full particulars as to the nature of this thing or things.”

Lorraine pulled her silk motor-bonnet tightly about her face and jumped into the car. With a low purr of the engine, she sped out of the wide drive into the boulevard.

Driving the car into the garage, she made her way directly to her study and picked up the morning mail. The pages fluttered swiftly as she critically scanned them. She breathed a sigh of relief when the contents of the last envelope had been disclosed. Nothing of the slightest importance had come through the mail. She ate a hearty breakfast, then turned to the pages in her notebook headed “ The Hartman Intruder.”

One by one, she went over every point she had gleaned from the stories she had heard, her cross-examinations and her own painstaking

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investigations. She examined Exhibits A and B, the black threads and the cord. The first were fine, evidently the white lady affected expensive garments.

“A costly, long black wrap,” Lorraine mused. “How else could a woman in white escape notice, even in the middle of the night! And common hemp rope, medium weight, but entirely dependable. That suggests a white bag, in which she carried a thin-bladed knife, a glass-cutter, a suction-cap, the piece of glass extracted, a pair of pliers, five yards or so of hemp, a bottle of chloroform, cotton, and what not! Certainly not a very ladylike collection!”

With these facts and “Motive?, Motive?” running through her head she sat for two long hours, theorizing and rejecting. Then, as though flecking aside the whole mysterious occurrence, she industriously answered in her brother’s name and filed away the morning’s correspondence.

In the late afternoon, she blew away the cobwebs of steady work by driving out in the long brown roadster. She made a forty mile run and came back greatly refreshed. She had timed her return well. Vesta Hartman’s voice answered in the affirmative over the wire, stating that the note was already on its way.

White Dominoes

Dear Miss Lancaster, (she read presently,)

My brother states that the only sacred Hindoo relics in the firm's possession at present are two; the first a valuable bronze statue of Vishnu from a little temple in Bengal. It was acquired in an entirely legitimate way. The second is a fetish of a Mahatma priest — a little, jeweled luck-charm, wonderfully carved. This was obtained through my father's agent at Lucknow. There is little known about it. The jewels are topaz, and there are thirteen of them, charming but inexpensive. The whole talisman is only one and one-half inches long and three-quarters of an inch wide. It is of fourteen carat gold, splendidly carved like a cheetah. Two of the jewels make the eyes, there is one in each foot, the remaining seven adorn the tail. There are some queer hieroglyphs scratched on one side. My uncle, quite a linguist, does not know the dialect. The little emblem is in the shop safe — has always been there since its arrival six months ago.

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I do hope my note has been explicit. Also, I hope Mr. Lancaster already has a strong suspicion of the guilty one.

Again thanking you deeply for acting as his proxy during his illness, and hoping for a speedy discovery,

Faithfully,

Vesta Hartman.

Lorraine filed the letter carefully with exhibits A and B. From a corner of a book-case, she took down a dog-eared volume on Hindoo customs and religion. She studied certain chapters absorbedly until dinner.

After that meal she added a second ponderous tome to the first and settled herself comfortably in the big chair. Two little wrinkles appeared between her eyes. Still she searched doggedly on. Frequently she turned back the pages to the table of contents, selecting and following up certain points minutely. She was surprised to hear the clock on the mantle chime twelve. So absorbing had been her search that she had not even noted the striking hours. A final thought obsessed her. For a last glance she opened the big book again. She read along, fatigued and tired from her persistent search.

The words began to come more slowly. Her head sank and she fell asleep.

* * * * *

She was aroused by the insistent tinkle of the hall 'phone. She was disgusted to find a cramp in her neck as she raised her head from the great book on which she had dozed. The powerful electric bulb gilded the circle about the table. Beyond that, the room appeared light. She snapped off the electricity and made her way to the hall. The light streaming in around the edges of the curtains told her that it was already morning.

"Yes," she answered over the telephone, "this is Paul Lancaster's residence. No, you can't talk to him, but I'll deliver a message. He's ill in bed — Pardon me, but that is impossible." The decisive tone was uppermost in her voice. "Of course, you can't give me the facts over the wire — I know that. But he can positively see no one — Yes, I know it must be important. This is his private secretary talking — his sister. He has commissioned me to take any imperative messages. I shall be glad to interview you at your residence."

A voice boomed through the receiver with equal decision. "This is Jeremiah Drift —"

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“—the millionaire beef-packer,” Lorraine’s now thoroughly aroused mind added.

“I tell you,” the commanding voice went on, “I must see Paul Lancaster. No temporary substitute will do. No one else is slated for this job. I—” Then his voice became pleading. “Please,” he urged, “let me have just ten minutes with him. If you will, I’ll leave my check for \$5,000 when I go—and \$5,000 more when he runs down—when he finishes.”

“Five thousand dollars! Five thousand dollars!” the clock by the stairs echoed.

Certain heavy losses resulting from Paul’s careless investments came to Lorraine’s mind. The hall clock relentlessly ticked on, “Five thousand dollars! Five thousand dollars!”

In sheer desperation, she spoke again. “Of course Mr. Lancaster may soon be able to attend to the matter, but in the meantime, couldn’t I—couldn’t I get the facts from you and then tell them to him the moment he is able?” Her voice faltered in its eagerness.

“No,” thundered the other voice. “Either I come there for ten minutes and tell him myself—or—or I’ll go to Smithers!”

“For ten minutes?” repeated Lorraine in an effort to gain time.

Here was Jeremiah Drift, influential and important — \$10,000 a possibility — or Smithers! And Paul Lancaster was speeding westward!

“Yes, my time is limited. What is it to be?” demanded Drift. “Do I see him or don’t I?”

“Five thousand dollars!” taunted the clock.

Lorraine’s delicate face flushed.

“H-how long can you wait before coming?” she parried, faltering.

“I’ll make it seven-thirty and no later. I’ve got to leave for Chicago on the eight forty-five.”

“Wait a moment,” pleaded Lorraine. “I’ll ask him.”

“Just one moment, then,” said the dogged voice.

The girl put down the receiver slowly and stood up. Her mouth was tightly shut as she stared at the ticking clock. After a pause she firmly picked up the phone. “*Mr. Lancaster will see you at seven-thirty.*”

Chapter IV

JEREMIAH DRIFT'S STORY

Very slowly Lorraine hung up the receiver. Her defiance had melted. She sat down suddenly in a chair and gazed at the clock.

"Five-thirty," she murmured aloud.

"Five thousand," brazenly corrected the clock.

Lorraine yawned broadly, gave her shoulders a little shake and then trembled with silent laughter. When she had somewhat relieved her pent-up emotions, she ran up the heavily carpeted stairs and knocked at Martha's door. Martha was that priceless jewel, a family servant who had been with them as far back as Lorraine could remember.

The gray-haired servant opened the door. "What is it, Miss Lorraine?"

Lorraine stepped inside. There was a murmur of low, insistent voices for a time. Then the door opened quickly upon a brightly smiling girl. Martha's face, in which perturbation and amazement fought for supremacy, looked

after her. Shaking her head disapprovingly, the trusty servant watched her go down the hall.

Peter, butler and general utility man, while slightly younger than Martha, had been with the Lancaster family many years. Lorraine knew his entire trustworthiness. She likewise knew what a punctilious early riser he was. He was already astir in the pantry.

“Morning, Miss Lorraine.” But his politeness could not conceal his surprise at the early appearance of the girl.

Lorraine talked to Peter with eager gestures. All the while he looked at her in undisguised astonishment. Once or twice he shook his head stubbornly. But, as usual, Lorraine’s wish carried against any obstacle.

Her wrist watch stood at ten minutes of six as she opened the door of her own room. She heard Martha pattering down stairs like a fluttering hen. Martha was the soul of obedience and promptitude. For five minutes Lorraine stood before her window looking down the broad avenue. The pale gold of the morning sunshine splashed the asphalt with generous dapplings of light that contrasted with the cool dark shadows of the trees. The twitter of a host of eager birds filled the air. It was so

poignantly lovely, so quiet, so apart from mystery and crime! With a slight shrug of her shoulders, Lorraine turned resolutely from the window. Her lips were set firmly, her face was resolute, alert and assured.

A low knock sounded.

"Miss Lorraine, Peter — is — is waiting for you in the den upstairs. He's all ready. But won't you have breakfast first?"

"Thank you, Martha, not till I have everything in readiness. Then, if there's time, I'll breakfast," responded Lorraine, blithely. "Just a minute, Martha, while I make out a list for you."

From a well-appointed desk she extracted a sheet of paper. She wrote firmly without a pause, then handed the result to Martha. Frowning and shaking her head over it, the old servant walked along the hall to the third door, opened it and disappeared.

Peter had long served Paul Lancaster as valet. He had attended many a fine gallant in his day, and he was expert and expeditious.

As Lorraine entered the den, he pointed to a straight-backed chair, then carefully placed a white covering closely around the girl's shoulders. For once his fingers fluttered nervously.

Snip — snip — snip, went the shears.

“Make it like Paul’s after a short illness; long, you know, but with his regulation good lines.”

Peter painstakingly laid long curling tendrils on a paper. Silence followed except for the clipping of the shears.

“This detective business —” muttered Peter, appalled by the stillness.

Lorraine’s merry reply completed his sentence. “— is the most fascinating game. Any one would think you had never helped Paul disguise himself!”

Peter smiled reminiscently as he carefully clipped above one ear.

“That I have,” he admitted. “Lots of times, but never at such a cost — as — as this.” His hand waved at the glowing chestnut mass.

“Pooh!” Lorraine grimaced. “There was too much of it anyway. It tired my head, you know. I feel wonderfully light and comfortable now. Besides, it grows very rapidly.”

Peter stood at one side and surveyed his handiwork. There was a whimsical expression about his mouth.

“Gracious,” he ejaculated, “funny what a pair of scissors can do, Miss! You’re the living image of Mr. Paul now.”

“Naturally, since we are twins.”

"Yes, but — but," stammered the old man, "clipping your hair has sort of changed your face. I know it sounds queer, but curls and long hair in a bunch sort of disguise — things, you know," he ended lamely.

Lorraine surveyed herself in the mirror over the fireplace. Her eyes opened wide. She saw a glossy, well trimmed crop of hair about her rather pale face. She stepped nearer. Mr. Drift had once before consulted Paul on a banknote disappearance. She had easily found the solution in that problem.

"Well, Peter," she observed, "by the aid of our very fine set of make-up, I shall be Paul unmistakably."

"Yes, yes, Miss," faltered the old man sheepishly as he scratched his head. "You'd deceive me so far as your looks, but Miss, you can't stand around like a wax image. Haven't you got to talk?"

Lorraine sat down in a chair and laughed. "Peter," she said, "you certainly have an eye for detail."

"Isn't that so, Miss?" he demanded, looking rather nonplussed and alarmed.

"Maybe I'm going to be a marionette, Peter." She smiled tantalizingly.

"Humph," grumbled Peter, "that wouldn't

be much like Mr. Paul. He dotes on talking." Again he shook his head perplexedly.

As Lorraine opened the door, she turned back with a parting injunction. "Remember, Peter, my instructions for seven thirty-five promptly."

"Yes, Miss," was the sober reply.

"And tell Martha I'll have breakfast later on."

* * * * *

Jeremiah Drift stepped out of his taxi exactly on time. Peter opened the door and escorted the pompous little magnate up the stairs.

"You are to come to his room, sir," he said in a low voice.

Jeremiah Drift strode along, glancing at his watch.

Peter knocked lightly on the third door from Lorraine's room. Then he turned the knob although Drift's attentive ear heard no response.

The heavy green shades were drawn a few inches below the center sash. The odor of drugs filled the sick-room. Drift looked directly at the figure seated in the Morris chair a few feet from the bed. Medicine glasses stood on a tabouret close to the chair. Lancaster's thin

hand in which the white showed through the brown, languidly motioned the early visitor to a comfortable rocker some six feet from the invalid's chair.

From under his busy eyebrows, Drift's keen eyes noted everything. He saw the young detective swathed in a dressing-gown. He marveled at the way Lancaster's finicky neatness persisted. The perfect linen and faultless cravat, even a topaz scarf-pin, peered out at the throat. A heavy gray silk scarf was thrown over the young detective's shoulders and hung down each side of the dressing-gown. Lancaster's face seemed a bit pale, but the eyes were unusually brilliant. The lips parted.

Jeremiah Drift instinctively leaned forward.

"Voice gone — heavy bronchitis — will have to whisper," came the hoarse tones from the chair.

Drift drew his chair a foot nearer.

"Mighty sorry," he said, glancing at his watch. "No one but you could do this." His tone was half apologetic. "Now, don't you say a word but just listen. These are the facts. I shall be gone from home a week. My necessary absence is a good touch to allay suspicion. When I come back, you will probably be better. You may likewise have found the explanation."

The lounging figure nodded curtly, and waved a hand for the caller to proceed.

“It’s a deep one. At twelve-thirty this morning, or thereabouts, I had a devil of an experience. I sat in my work room on the first floor going over important papers on this Chicago business. I must have worked till nearly midnight. Once during the evening James, my man, brought me my usual Scotch. The room was warm. I became tired and dozed. I was aroused by some one in the room. As I opened my eyes — don’t you dare laugh, Lancaster, for I swear that it was only my usual Scotch — a woman in white, all in white, stood at my elbow. And, before I could as much as swear, she had stuffed my mouth with chloroformed cotton. Then she gagged me neatly, pinioned my arms, and tied me up like a helpless hen. I never recall such strong wrists — such quick, neat work. She forced my head down and lashed me to the chair thoroughly. The stuff in my mouth half smothered me. I faintly heard her move about the room for some minutes. I couldn’t see what was going on but I suspected she was taking those important papers of mine. Then she switched off the lights and made her getaway. For an hour I worked like a fiend, biting and chewing and spitting, my head

thumping like a trip-hammer. Finally I got my mouth free, my head became a bit clearer. When I'm not taken by surprise, I'm strong enough. At last I succeeded in loosening one foot — ”

A light knock came and Peter entered, carrying a little silver tray. On it was a glass of water, a spoon and a bottle.

“Seven thirty-five,” thought the invalid as the dose was administered.

The door had hardly closed when Drift continued. “— I kicked myself in the chair to the wall. There I banged and banged the chair against the wall. James came in a little after three and freed me. — What do you think we saw?”

The reclining figure shook its head quickly.

“Not content with making off with my valuable papers, she made a sight of my room. She smudged the walls, the furniture and the curtains with red crosses, six crosses of brilliant crimson. Here's one.”

From a vest pocket he displayed a piece of silk. On it a crude cross was splashed in oil paint.

“That's a bit of the draperies,” Drift observed ruefully. “And those papers, why, man, they are worth a king's ransom.” His

fist smote his knee. "All signed and sealed. You've got to get them to me at Chicago, Lancaster. Here's my address."

"What else?" came the whisper. "The room —"

"She entered by cutting a hole in the window. No sign of the glass anywhere. "And, Lancaster," Drift's voice sank as he leaned forward, "that wasn't any woman. She had the wrists of a Japanese wrestler. Why she didn't cut my throat is beyond me."

The famous criminal investigator had been writing rapidly in a small notebook. A red spot had appeared in each white cheek. Uneasily Drift noted this, and as uneasily glanced at his watch.

"Shoot your questions quick," he said.

"Anybody know about these papers?"

"Only my lawyers, Standish and Standish."

"How many papers were there?"

"Two. You can't mistake them. My name is on them, also my seal."

"They were sealed in red," the whisper came quickly. It was not a question.

Drift nodded.

"Dan Morgan is still in the penitentiary for that other little affair?"

"Sure."

The detective leaned forward, whispering a request. "Give me a note that I may send a trusty helper to investigate. Also the key to your room. Of course, you have locked it?"

Drift passed over a key and hurriedly scrawled a few words with his fountain pen. Then he stood up.

"I think this will do. And here is the \$5,000."

The invalid's slight fingers fluttered. Then a quick sharp whisper intercepted Drift's departure.

"*Red-haired?*" the great man exclaimed in answer. "*No, indeed, her hair was coal black, and she was stout.*"

Chapter V

\$500 — FROM WHOM?

An alert figure threw aside the dressing-gown and kicked off the slippers disdainfully. From the shadows of the curtains, Lorraine watched Jeremiah Drift step into his taxi. The machine was hardly on its way before her swift fingers pressed the call-bell twice. While she awaited Martha's appearance she surveyed herself in her brother's pier-glass. She was not vain, merely curious. She wore a smart gray business suit, one of Paul's new ones. It was a bit large but not noticeably so. She had been prudently painstaking in that unexpected debut of hers. While in her role of sick man, she didn't expect any unanticipated developments, yet she was prepared. Hence her careful toilette of which Drift had noticed only the collar and tie.

Martha knocked at the door.

"Breakfast in my own room, please, Martha."

When the maid appeared with a well laden

tray, she found Lorraine dressed in an attractive gray gown. She was trying her close-fitting motor bonnet over her shorn head.

“There, Martha,” the girl said when she had adjusted it carefully. “Come close. Would you notice anything?”

The bright eyes of the kindly old woman scanned her mistress critically. She walked around her before committing herself.

“Why — er — it seems all right,” she judged. “Mebbe you’d better put on a veil. Just wind it prettily about your bonnet, you know.”

“Martha,” said Lorraine suddenly between bites of delectable toast. “Didn’t you used to know quite a bit about hair-dressing?”

“Certainly, Miss Lorraine. In my younger days, I studied with a hair-dresser.”

“To be sure — I knew it,” enthused Lorraine, as she attacked a chop hungrily. “Well, Martha, suppose you try your skill at making my erstwhile hair into a wig. Of course, I can’t wear my motor bonnet all the time.”

“Are you going to be Mr. Paul or yourself?” asked Martha dubiously.

Lorraine poured out a second cup of coffee, enriching it lavishly with thick cream. Martha potted about expectantly. She was too well

trained to ask more questions of her mistress.

“That was a delicious breakfast,” Lorraine told her, leaning back in her chair.

From the closet, Martha brought out a long brown rajah motor coat and a crêpe de Chine veil. The girl slipped into her coat and adjusted the much scrutinized bonnet, knotting the veil carelessly. With a few final words to Martha, who followed her to the door, she stepped into the roadster and swept away.

As she skillfully threaded the maze of growing traffic, Lorraine mentally sifted and grouped the identical features of the two extraordinary night visits.

The woman in white — first floor room — window ingress and similar glass cutting — the extraordinarily strong wrists of the unconventional lady — the general points of similarity in dress, likewise the identical methods of attack, chloroforming and binding — the peculiar and sinister attention given to the color red, in the first place by the objects attacked, in the second place by the purloining of the red-sealed papers, accompanied by the cryptic scarlet crosses defacing the room. But here the great and surprising difference! White lady Number 2 was raven-haired and corpulent!

Lorraine slowed down expertly at a stop

signal, not even shifting into second, then pressed the accelerator and resumed her normal speed and her perplexing problem.

“With the bare facts,” she reflected, “the indices seem to point to a mysterious pair duplicating each other’s midnight deprecations. Will a third blond-haired woman appear to complicate matters? But why, why?” she kept questioning, and the motor softly purred in echo.

Somewhere in that baffling tangle of mysteries was the clue that would make all clear and the quest thrilled her. This was her first case single handed. Her eyes sparkled with keen enjoyment. It was far more fascinating, getting at the facts first-hand. Before, when Paul had done the field-work, her mind had merely visualized the situation. Now her work was a thrilling reality, not cold mental deduction.

After a quick survey of Drift’s scrawled note, James, the door man, solemnly ushered her to the heavy panelled door. His respect deepened as he saw her extract the key from her bag. Who was this girl so greatly in his austere employer’s confidence? She dismissed the waiting servant, saying that she would like to question him later. The spring-lock clicked behind her.

She found herself in a sumptuous room, wainscoted to the ceiling. Rare curios from the four corners of the earth enhanced the richness of the furnishings. The dark Circassian chairs were deeply upholstered in dull morocco. The great open fireplace yawned darkly. From its mantel a little squatting bronze idol twisted its lips in a sardonic smile. A huge carved table held the place of honor in the center of the room. On it stood a magnificent lamp. Against an inner wall was a large, upholstered chair. Broken and twisted cords lay across and around it.

Lorraine's gaze swept the room intently. It was a bizarre sight. From the beautiful hangings, the panelled sides, the upholstered furniture, the carved table, even the lamp, crude scarlet crosses stared at her. Sometimes the implement used in this strange vandalism seemed to have faltered, dropping careless splotches.

The girl followed exactly the same procedure in her investigation that she had carried out in the Hartman home. Minutely she studied the five inch circle cut in the window pane. There were no blinds, but heavy bushes screened one end of the veranda. Her microscope disclosed no footprints, nor was she able to find any

indications of a black garment. Re-entering the room, she examined the cord, comparing it with her hoarded bit. The hemp was the same in size and quality. Search as she would, not the ghost of a finger-mark rewarded her. Assuming that the second visitor had also worn white gloves, she leaned against the fire-place speculatively. Admiring the massive brass andirons, she noted that one was crowded close against the stone side of the fire place. A bit of white caught her eye. She stooped quickly.

A pearl button rewarded her. It was about three-quarters of an inch in diameter. And on its shining face a little crest with two letters, S and L, had been incised. Triumphantly she opened the rubber-encased microscope and examined her find. With a sigh of satisfaction, she deposited this important bit in her bag. Shutting the door behind her, she stepped across the hall to the reception room and pressed the button. James appeared promptly.

His story merely verified that of his master. In addition, she learned that he himself had locked the windows properly the night before. He declared that in the discharge of his duties nothing unusual had impressed him.

“Mr. Drift was still working at the table when you locked up the room?”

"Yes, Miss. He told me to go ahead as he was going to bed directly."

"Could you tell over what he was working?"

"No, Miss."

"Who else was in the house last night?"

"The cook and Gaston, the valet. The family's at the shore."

"Do the cook and Gaston know of this affair?"

"Yes, Miss. They couldn't help but hear the noise."

"What noise?"

"Mr. Drift banging his chair against the wall. Besides, Miss, Mr. Drift was in a frightful temper and bellowed out in the hall about what had happened. I told them to keep quiet though."

"I don't recall that Gaston was with you at the time the house was robbed two years ago."

"No, Miss. He's been with us only a year. But he's very careful, and came with good recommendations."

"From whom?"

"Only the master knows."

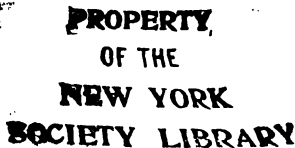
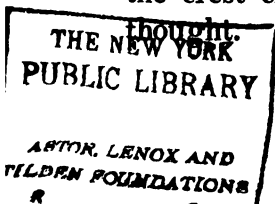
"That will do. Please send the cook to me," said the girl.

Lorraine's questions elicited from the frightened old woman only the facts that she had

heard persistent bangings on the wall and then Mr. Drift shouting out what had happened. She declared that she had not discussed the matter with any one. An interview with Gaston disclosed practically the same state of affairs.

The convenient roadster hurried Lorraine to the reference-room of a certain great building. Soon she was perusing a large volume dealing with coat-of-arms and other insignia. For an hour she approached her problem from every angle her fertile brain could devise. But the facsimile of her find in the fireplace was not included. This complicated matters. It suggested that S. L., the owner of the baffling crest had either designed the little emblem or caused it to be manufactured to order. This intimated the method of the nouveau riche. But even a crest thus acquired seemed to have no relation to the deeds of the midnight intruder.

The rest of the morning Lorraine spent among the best-known genealogists. She reasoned that a person of means, desiring an appropriate and impressive coat-of-arms, would go to a firm with a reputation. But no one offered her any help from this angle. The solution of the crest clue was not so easy as she had first



She was grateful for the tempting luncheon Martha had prepared. She was also entirely satisfied with the old servant's progress in wig-making. Somewhat reluctantly Lorraine forced her mind to the routine matters of the office. Only more stodgy letters and a few unimportant telephone calls occupied her. A few inquiries as to Paul's recovery she answered guardedly. She gave the impression that his condition seemed unchanged. She speculated as to Paul's present whereabouts. What would be his sentiment could he look in upon her present activities? She smiled mischievously. Somehow her more frequent runs in the motor had given her better color. But she was extremely tired.

How long would people be content to permit Paul Lancaster's assistant, or whatever they dubbed her, to perform his hitherto personal investigations? She could not deny that good fortune had aided her thus far. What, for example, if Jeremiah Drift had not been called to Chicago for a week? She knew that this, and only this, had saved her in this affair. Drift would not have been satisfied with the investigations of a girl for to Paul had gone all the credit for her success in the Drift banknote affair. Again, the police had been ignored in

both her present investigations. Certainly it was an extraordinary bit of good fortune which had not brought the matters to detective headquarters. Tragedy had not yet shown its ugly face.

Just when Lorraine had lost interest in the dull details of her office routine, the telephone rang as a pleasant break—not that she expected anything, but it gave her a chance to divert her interests. Quite casually she shook the ache out of her shoulders as she answered the woman's voice.

"Yes," she said, "this is Miss Lancaster. What's that?" Her voice had become instantly attentive. "Miss—Miss Hartman—Clear this line, central, I can't hear—Now, Miss Hartman. You wish to see me at once?—an extraordinary development? No, not over the line, please. I'll come right over.—Oh, no, I'd just as soon come. I've been working rather steadily and was going out for a spin anyway."

She smiled as she thought of the all-important bonnet which made the roadster such an invaluable ally. She was soon speeding along, urged by her anticipations. If only Vesta Hartman's new clue, whatever it was, would supplement, rather than complicate, the pearl

button with the two letters in a little crest!

"It's the queerest thing," Vesta Hartman assured her, bubbling over with excitement, as she hurried Lorraine to the den. She seated her with little ceremony.

"Just see what came to Doris through the mail this afternoon." She thrust an envelope into Lorraine's ready fingers.

"Excellent quality of stationery — watermark, Claymore linen, a popular, expensive make — merely a city postmark, indicating the central office, else the branch would be stamped — time one-thirty — typed address, firm touch denoting an expert with the machine," deduced Lorraine before opening the envelope.

Vesta Hartman hung on her every word. Admiration glowed in her face.

"All of this shows that the sender adopted every precaution to remain unknown. It surely is an anonymous letter," concluded Lorraine, opening the envelope.

She extracted the thick contents slowly. Neglecting the enclosed letter, she first opened a small envelope. Two thin pieces of bristol board, fitting nicely, were wound with elastic bands. When she snapped these off, five crisp \$100 bills fluttered out.

The polished surface of the bristol board

showed indistinct marks. Lorraine deposited everything carefully in her lap, then opened the note.

A single typed line met her glance, and this is what she read:

For Value Received Sunday at Midnight.

Chapter VI

THE POWER OF THE PRESS

The glossy bristol board offered an excellent surface for finger-prints. Before Lorraine left the Hartman house she had eliminated Vesta's and Doris' handiwork from this important clue. A clearly defined, unidentified thumb-mark remained. From her familiarity with the characteristics of finger-prints, she knew that the lines indicated a delicate, tapering thumb and a proportionately slender hand. This seemed to conflict with the exceptional strength of the midnight marauder's wrist. It also showed a lamentable lack of that precaution which the white-gloved lady hitherto had exhibited in such a truly professional way. What had caused this slip?

Beyond this development, Lorraine's progress was blocked for the present. She spent the following day in investigations which succeeded only in eliminating certain possible theories. She seemed no nearer to the discovery of the master clew to all the mysteries. But many

a previous case had presented none but chaotic and seemingly meaningless circumstances at the start.

She was decidedly relieved the third morning when no distress call informed her of the appearance of a midnight marauding blonde. Somehow, she had half fancied that the queer transitions of the white-robed women might produce a fair-haired sister. She had problems enough without any further complications.

The morning paper, however, had given her sense of security a sad jolt. With unconcealed amazement, she read the following edifying account:

STARTLING MIDNIGHT EPISODE!

Jeremiah Drift the Victim

Mr. Jeremiah Drift, the well-known packer, of 17 Mountain Boulevard, was the victim of a peculiar visit shortly after midnight night before last. The facts of this mysterious case have just become known.

Mr. Drift, according to his custom, was engaged until a late hour in the handsome den on the first floor of his mansion. Weary from the many problems of his tremendously busy life, he

had fallen asleep over his work. He was awakened by the presence of something unusual—something sinister—in the room. To his astonishment, a wraithlike figure swathed in white, stood before him. Was it a ghost? But no, he saw masses of raven hair above the mysterious intruder's white mask. And furthermore the substantial reality of the unceremonious visitor was soon impressed upon the startled millionaire. With a pantherlike bound, she threw herself at his throat, seizing it with a grip of steel beneath the white-gloved fingers. The breathless victim was next quickly and strongly gagged with chloroformed cotton. The female fury then bound the helpless prisoner to his heavy chair.

When Mr. Drift recovered his senses, the room was in darkness. The midnight intruder had fled. Enraged by his own docile conduct before the white-clad Amazon, Mr. Drift struggled in his chair. While he was unable to remove the gag, he did succeed in freeing one foot. By pounding vigor-

ously, he finally brought the servants to his aid. The irate magnate was freed shortly before daybreak.

Nor was Mr. Drift's experience the sole reminder of the fantastic caller. The handsome den had been methodically and ruthlessly mutilated. Great, staring blood-red crosses, like the fatal symbol of some secret society, had been daubed over the walls and furniture. Furthermore a search disclosed a neat circle cut in the glass of one of the windows. Thus the mysterious lady had entered in a truly professional manner.

Making light of the affair, Mr. Drift has already left for Chicago. Who this strange woman was — what the object of her quest — he is wholly at a loss to explain. Only three of the servants were in the house at the time. Mrs. Drift is spending the summer at Ashford-by-the-Sea. It is said on good authority that entirely competent investigators are looking into the matter.

Lorraine reread the account. With the exception of a few specific details and the usual

embellishment of the write-up expert, it was surprisingly accurate. The absence of any reference to the stolen papers was an interesting omission. What did it signify? Probably either lack of knowledge or voluntary withholding. But who had advised the press? Not Mr. Drift, certainly.

The newspaper office would throw no light on the matter, except that one Bray, a reporter, had "dug up" the story. Bray refused to divulge the source of his information, but affirmed that the account was authentic. Beyond that the newspaper felt no particular duty. Without doubt, Lorraine concluded, one of the servants had been induced to give the facts.

Further speculations about this anonymous informant soon faded into insignificance. The Thursday morning papers showed scare-head capitals:

**GRUESOME MURDER IN
ARISTOCRATIC ELSI-
NORE PARK**

*Miss Rebecca Ardmore Brutally
Stabbed to Death!*

Many Mysterious Features
Exclusive Elsinore Park was the
scene of a revolting crime last night.

Shortly after midnight Miss Rebecca Ardmore was discovered stabbed to death in her reading-room on the first floor. The rest of the household had retired, leaving Miss Ardmore reading late, according to her habit.

Miss Molly Ardmore, niece of the murdered woman, was awakened by a terrible cry. Hurrying to her aunt's room, Miss Molly was frozen with horror at what she beheld. Miss Ardmore sat lifeless in her chair, stabbed to death with a dagger. Half-fainting, the girl was about to cry out for help when her cousin, Mr. Lee Normand, appeared. Horrified at the sight, he promptly called the family physician and the police.

The police immediately discovered how the house had been entered. A circle had been cut in the window of the library, adjoining Miss Rebecca's private reading-room. Mr. Normand identified the murderer's weapon as a stiletto used in the library as a paper-knife. This the criminal must have picked up when passing through the room. The instrument is handsomely

carved, with a stiff steel blade and a finely pointed end. It has been used by the family for many years, having been brought from abroad by the woman whose life it ended.

The murdered woman was well-known, not only in this locality but throughout the country. She belonged to the noted Ardmore family, one of the most aristocratic in the land. Distinguished statesmen, historians, poets and authors have made known the Ardmore name in two continents.

Probably no more cultured scholar of the old school lived than Miss Ardmore. She was one of the early graduates of Mt. Holyoke College, and had studied extensively abroad. She was a woman of high literary attainments, and the author of several exceptional books.

Miss Ardmore inherited the enormous fortune of her uncle, Jeffery Ardmore. Her niece and nephew are the only near relatives, and have made their home with her for some time. Miss Molly Ardmore has recently been graduated from Mt. Holyoke and is

barely 22 years of age. The young woman is prostrated by the tragedy.

Mr. Lee Normand, the only son of Belle Ardmore, the famous Ardmore beauty, is one of the most promising poets of the younger school. No less an authority than Sir Winston Bangs has declared the young man's lyrics to be of remarkable excellence.

The palatial home of the Ardmores at 13 Elsinore Park is one of the handsomest in the city. This aristocratic residential section has been singularly free from tragedy up to this time.

The police are at work on the baffling affair and expect to report some startling developments soon.

Lorraine stared at the type. The very absence of detail, the over-emphasis placed on the personality side of the Ardmore family, told her plainly how meagre were the details which the police had permitted to get into print. Was it a coincidence or was there a connection between that sinister circle in the window—the one thing which had arrested her breathless scrutiny? But no other familiar details had been printed. Had there been any? The story

of the newspaper here quoted was identical with that of the other morning dailies. Just what did she expect? It was astounding that so many things could be rolled into those few days which she had so cursorily labeled "Doubtless unimportant." Her own confidence had found her out and was taunting her.

The Hartman and Drift affairs now seemed like the kindergarten prelude to the real crime. Strive as she would, she couldn't help but feel that somehow, somewhere, that knotted thread would run through, dyed red in the present tragedy. One woman had begun by defacing property, a second had added robbery. Had a belligerent blonde stopped at nothing short of murder! But no mention was made of such a suspicion. The picture of the thing hypnotized her by its horror. What if she should be called upon to investigate? Already the newspapers hinted at baffling complications. She knew what that meant—the usual "killed by person or persons unknown" until Paul Lancaster, Investigator, appeared upon the scene!

How soon would Paul be called for and her masquerade discovered?

The tragedy at 13 Elsinore Park fascinated her. Yet, was she actually courting a call from police headquarters with its attendant personal

complications? Suppose one should come? What would she do? Surely no woman would be considered competent to attempt what the police could not accomplish! Although she had read of crime after crime in the papers, never before had any case made such a personal appeal to her. It was almost as though the spirit of helpless old age cried out to her for vengeance. It was such a pitiful thing, so — so fiendish. And it seemed somehow so much more real.

The sharp cry of "Extra! Extra!" caught her ear. In her eagerness, she went to the door herself and bought a paper feverishly. There were only long wordy accounts of the family and its connections. To these voluminous adjectives, had been added a picture of the house (the window of the fateful room being marked with a cross), and photographs of the three members of the family. Lorraine smiled at the clever artistry by which mere words, strung to a nicety, could rehash old facts and retain the public's interest. The story was spun out to fill columns of space.

The smile on her lips suddenly vanished as her eyes caught a single sentence near the end of the last paragraph. Her cheek paled as she read:

“It is stated on good authority that the mysterious affair is to be placed in the hands of Mr. Paul Lancaster, the well-known expert investigator.”

Chapter VII

THE GRIM FACE OF TRAGEDY

The telephone jangled, disturbing Lorraine strangely. An intuition of impending complications swept over her. Somehow the room seemed chilly, although the summer day was warm. A portentous quiet filled the air. Only the leaves, brushing against the windows disturbed the stillness.

The moment she took up the receiver, before she could utter a word, a curt voice questioned, "Lancaster?"

"No, this is Miss Lancaster. I'm sorry, but my brother is ill in bed —"

"Switch my call to his room then," the peremptory voice demanded.

Lorraine had by this time recognized the voice of John Marshall, Chief of Police. A feeling of apprehension gripped her.

"While he could hear you, bronchitis has reduced his voice to a whisper. May I not deliver a message?"

A momentous pause ensued. Lorraine could

almost see the heavy, frowning face of the police chief.

"I will try to talk to him anyway. Connect me."

"Just a moment, please."

The pulses in her wrists seemed to thrum. Then she took up the receiver again.

"Lancaster?" the same voice repeated.

"Yes," Lorraine's whisper rattled.

"Forget that cold. You're needed at once, at 13 Elsinore Park. Of course you have seen the papers. There is a lot more they didn't get. Gray is down there now, and he knows that I am sending you. How soon can you get there?"

Only too well did Lorraine know the significance of a call from headquarters. Her hoarse whisper began a reply.

"Can't understand a word," Marshall interrupted. "Get your sister to come to the telephone again."

A little smile crept over Lorraine's lips. A spark in the gloom certainly! She allowed the proper time to elapse before answering in her own voice. "Paul says that he's pretty well under the weather, not up to scratch, but—he'll c-come." Her voice ended in a gulp.

The click of the disconnect was the

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chief's only acknowledgment of her momentous decision.

"Never mind bronchitis, never mind anything! Chief Marshall's mind knows only the necessity of action," Lorraine thought as she dashed upstairs.

She was grateful now for her dress rehearsal. Soon Paul Lancaster's elegantly garbed figure sat at the wheel of the long brown roadster. The cries of the newsboys sent the news of the crime shrilling through the main thoroughfares. How ugly it sounded in their piping, screaming voices! "Old millionaire lady murdered! Mysterious stabbing!—Extra! Extra!" She was glad to swing into the magnificent speedway which led to exclusive and wealthy Elsinore Park. All along the beautiful drive, the environment seemed so foreign to what awaited her. Somehow murder belonged to the sordid, the slums, the underworld.

She drew up before the handsome Venetian gates at the entrance. Through many trees a rambling gray stone house was visible. Its bright red roof, ordinarily a pleasing contrast to the green, chilled her. Now it seemed dyed with blood. The grim face of tragedy leered at her from its glowing gables.

A whispering, morbidly curious crowd stood

before the high iron fence. Some peered through with bright, seeking eyes. Others watched the burly policeman guarding the gates. A boy in knee-trousers poked the lens of his camera through the fence, squinting carefully through the finder. A little group approached the Lancaster car.

Raising his stick in salute, the bluecoat unlocked the gates and thrust back the crowd. Slowly the roadster crept through and up the gravel drive. The crunch of the heavy tires seemed discordant in the silence of the stately place. Another policeman saluted respectfully at the door of the residence, as the young detective parked the car and approached the veranda. The dapper figure of Paul Lancaster was well known to the force. Silently the heavy door swung to behind the slight figure that stepped into the sombre hall.

Lorraine had never known a more soundless place. Its stillness weighed upon her. It was the first time that she had been brought so close to the tragedy of sudden death. She knew Paul had faced these things. Certainly there must be a quality of steel somewhere beneath his debonnaire exterior.

Gray, the cleverest detective on the force, detached himself from the shadows before a

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closed door. Lorraine stared in fascination at the dark panels. Behind them, she knew, an old woman had been brutally done to death.

The face of the detective lighted a bit at the sight of the slender figure in gray. This member of the regular force secretly admired the brilliant young crime investigator with whom he had often worked. He had the sense to know when he faced a blank wall and he didn't insist upon futilely banging his head against it.

"Glad you're here, Lancaster," he said simply.

His lowered voice, his deference, was impressive. The presence of Death hovered about them in the stillness. Lorraine's gloved fingertips bit into her palms as she looked at the silent door. As from a great distance she heard Gray's hushed voice.

"It's a bad business."

"Don't tell me what you have discovered yet, Gray," the whisper adjured him.

Gray's quick glance saw the rather colorless face and the closely muffled throat.

"Fierce cold," he sympathized.

Lorraine shrugged her shoulders. "I want to look over the room alone first, please."

Gray nodded and noiselessly unlocked the door.

Lorraine turned the knob and stepped in, shutting the door behind her soundlessly. She heard Gray lock her in, then his muffled foot-falls died away.

The shades were still drawn. A velvet blackness shrouded the room in mourning. Groping beside the door, her trembling finger at last found the electric button. The powerful electric light flooded the apartment with blinding light. The brilliancy of that sudden glare seemed oddly like a jarring sound. Very slowly, with her back braced against the door, Lorraine brought her eyes to the still figure huddled in the chair.

It was not eight feet away from the threshold, but the pitiless light made it seem much nearer. Lorraine noted the congealed look of horror on the white face. Her eyes purposely avoided those other staring, sightless ones. She saw the fine lace around the throat, the beautiful cameo in the fichu, the daintily sprigged silk dress. The very cheery note of the gown contrasted so ironically with the tragedy it had last attended. Now that she stood in the presence of what she dreaded, all the little petty details seemed to be imprinting themselves on her mind. She noted the book where it had dropped from the nerveless hand, and now lay still beside the

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still feet on the hassock. Then her wide eyes beheld the carved handle at the end of the shining blade. A great brown spot was mercifully toned down by the brownish hue of the dress. Another darker spot stained the edge of the chair and the oriental rug. Again Lorraine's spell-bound gaze returned to the horror stamped on the face.

The pity that made Lorraine's heart ache was swept away by a wave of relentless anger at the cowardice of the deed. Not on her lips but in her mind and heart the resolution shaped itself that the murderer should not escape. The voice of decency, of humanity appealed to her in the presence of the dead. A strange calm took possession of the girl. A great purpose stripped fear from her. Why had she thought it gruesome? The spirit of the real detective filled her again.

Minutely, with unflinching eyes, she went over everything in the room. She noted the securely bolted windows, behind the drawn shades. Declining years always kept away from draughts. Then she saw what she had overlooked at first.

Three rough, blood-red crosses glared malignantly from the wall close by the door. At the sight of them her heart skipped a beat. The

trail of mystery had ended in tragedy. Her microscope soon showed that these symbols had been made with common red chalk. There were no others in the room; these three crosses alone had been left as an ugly memento of the visit. She searched feverishly for the crayon, although she knew that the police must have done this before.

Finally, the position of a little landscape by Corot caught her glance. She approached the painting quickly. Behind it, as though tossed recklessly, lay a half stick of red chalk. Eagerly she examined it, but no finger-marks rewarded her.

“The gloves!” her mind suggested. “Were they the gloves of a mysterious white-garbed woman?”

Methodically she put the chalk in one pocket. Unflinching she approached the stiletto which projected from the silent figure. She stooped and with her microscope, examined the handle. Not the trace of a finger-print on its beautifully polished surface!

“The gloves again!” she sighed.

She brought out Paul’s little black leather case. From it she drew a nickel instrument. She wondered if it would take much strength — but much of the blade still showed. Grip-

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ping the stiletto just below the handle with her instrument, and clinching her teeth, she gave a quick pull. It was not hard at all. And the blade showed for a certainty that the knife had barely penetrated the heart. Her knowledge of anatomy told her that. It likewise seemed to indicate that a person with a *weak wrist* had committed the deed. Was this the weakness of the fair-haired woman? She brushed this speculation aside. She simply must not let those other occurrences bias her mind in this case.

Very gingerly she placed the fatal weapon on a copper card-tray, which lay on the table. Once more she examined the carved handle and the steel blade. Not the suggestion of a fingerprint!

"Cold-blooded and professional," she told herself.

Again hot anger seized her. Never before had she experienced such emotions. Previously she had seemed a mere spectator at a tragedy, not a vital character in it.

Gently she turned the knob of the door. Gray's acute ear heard and quickly he turned the key.

"Well?" he questioned.

"No definite clue," Lorraine whispered.
"Now tell me what you know."

Gray seemed relieved that Paul Lancaster had not discovered some neglected bit of evidence.

“Come into the library and see what we found there.”

Lorraine followed him as he unlocked the door. The Ardmore library was considered one of the finest in the state. Thousands of books lined the shelves. Paying scant heed to other details, Lorraine instantly examined the hole in the window. This time it was only four inches in diameter—a mere detail, of course, but the other holes had been five inches. She noted this fact in her book. Gray watched her curiously. Her glance slowly swept over the rich furniture, the heavy shelves, the books with their red morocco bindings still intact. Her eyes rested at last upon the huge library table. She darted to it. Gray’s satisfaction showed that he had been expecting this move.

The circle of glass cut from the window lay on the table. It had been placed there carefully. Not a crack or a chip showed. She stooped over and examined it.

“You picked it up, I see,” she whispered.

Gray looked offended. “Not I,” he defended vigorously, “That nincompoop by the door did it, while I was in the other room.”

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"It doesn't matter," whispered Lorraine. "There are no other marks. Your investigations now?"

They seated themselves at the table. Gray began slowly.

"Of course, I've noted the lack of fingerprints on the knife and the weak blow which sent it home. I'm not bothering about the three red crosses yet — that looks kind of amateurish to me. But there is no other evidence of a slip-up."

He settled himself comfortably as he continued. "I gave young Normand the once over, after a frightened servant had let me in. Normand seemed in a blue funk, shivered and shook and acted scared stiff. He hesitated before answering anything and stammered when he did answer."

His companion nodded understandingly.

"Said he didn't sleep well last night. Felt nervous and restless. Had half resolved to get up and read when he heard an awful cry. He hurried down stairs — his room is near the head of the stairs. Half way down or so he saw Molly Ardmore coming away from the brightly lighted room. Her face was horrified and she just stood and stared at Normand. He looked past her. Then he saw the old lady limp in

her chair with the stiletto in her. He said he knew that she was dead. But he had the good sense to shut the door. By that time the cook, the maid, and the housekeeper had appeared. He sent the maid with Miss Molly to her room, and telephoned for the doctor and the police."

Gray paused to stare at the sphinxlike face of the detective. He hurriedly resumed his story.

"Dr. Waterman was just leaving when I arrived. He stated that the old lady must have died instantly."

"Did you question the girl?" queried Lorraine.

"Yes. She was hysterical — merely moaning that she heard her aunt cry out and rushed in and found her."

"Where does she sleep?"

Gray chose his words deliberately. "Second door beyond the little reading-room there."

"Old Miss Ardmore slept in the room between?"

"Yes. All her rooms were on the first floor. Stairs tired her."

Gray continued doggedly. "The housekeeper gave important testimony. Her room is at the rear of the house. She too was hot and uneasy in the night. Got up and sat in the window

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for a breath of air. The moon was bright and she thought she saw someone move in the shadow of a tree. She watched closely and she swears that a tall slender woman in white stood out against the shadows. Then slowly the white seemed to fade into the gloom. But she was positive that later a dark figure crept from tree to tree until it disappeared in the shadows of the hedge. You know the high hedge shuts off the rear grounds from outside. Then she heard the commotion down stairs and went down."

"Any one else see this figure?" whispered his companion.

"Not as far as I can learn." Gray moistened his lips as he paused.

"Yes," breathed Lorraine. "You haven't told all."

Gray looked at her in surprise. She wondered if his trump card — for she knew it was that — had been reserved for a dramatic climax. Or was it that he hesitated for some other reason?

"No," admitted Gray in a low voice. "I have purposely left out the best, in fact the only clue I found. I knew the cook was hiding something. She cried and begged me not to question her. I had to dig it out. She swore

between her sobs that what the old lady screamed out after her terrible cry was — ”

He paused perceptibly.

“ — *Molly, Molly, don't knife me!* ”

Chapter VIII

THE NET TIGHTENS

If Gray expected Lancaster to show any emotion he was disappointed. The young detective never moved a muscle. After a brief pause, those dark eyes narrowed a bit, but they seemed to be looking far beyond Gray. He wondered what thoughts were hidden behind that expressionless face. Sometimes the unresponsiveness of young Lancaster jolted his nerves. Possibly, however, this very reticence explained the detective's almost unerring instinct. But the force had come to consider any irrelevant question as merely another mark of his genius. Somehow, Lancaster always managed to deliver the goods. His methods were erratic, but they were undoubtedly merely the idiosyncrasies of a master.

Gray stuffed his hands in his pockets, but said nothing. He had done his duty.

Lorraine finally broke the silence. "I want to see Molly Ardmore first."

“It’s rather tough on the girl, grilling her at such a time,” commented Gray.

The barest expression of surprise passed over Lorraine’s face. This from Gray, the most hardened member of the force! Molly Ardmore must be particularly appealing for Gray to let pity sway him even for a minute.

Before Lorraine’s mind flashed a picture of that room of death. Her lips straightened into a grim line. The culprit, whoever it might be, should pay the penalty. It was only because of unpardonable oversights that more criminals were not apprehended. And every such escape from justice only increased the menace to society.

“I shall have to talk to Molly Ardmore,” she reiterated firmly. Gray arose. “Are you through with that room?” he asked.

“Yes, the undertaker may come any time now, as far as I am concerned.”

Still Gray hesitated. He cleared his throat. “In — in my experience,” he suggested apologetically, “and I’m older than you, I have seen more than one case lost because of some slight oversight. Are you sure, are you positive nothing else remains there?”

“I have finished,” whispered Lorraine with asperity. “But you and the entire force are at

liberty to search there as long as you wish to."

Gray, muttering something about circumstantial evidence, left the room. He returned shortly to say that the maid had promised to bring Miss Molly immediately. The two detectives waited in silence. Only the quick moving of Lorraine's eyelashes told how rapidly her mind was revolving about this new evidence and the things it so inexorably involved.

The slightest knock fluttered against the door. Lorraine herself opened it.

A slender, delicate girl looked at her with great gray eyes. The papers had stated that Molly Ardmore was twenty-two, but to Lorraine she seemed much younger, like some frail girl in her teens. The rare beauty of the oval face with its transparent skin, its masses of burnished hair, reminded her of some of the pictured Madonnas she had seen in the Uffizzi Gallery in Florence. The willowy grace of the slight figure with its patrician air of dignity, completed the beauty of the girl so strangely enmeshed in the net of crime.

Lorraine quietly motioned her to a chair. The absence of her maid showed that Molly Ardmore had resolved to face the ordeal alone. Gray stared stolidly out of the window. But the girl's anxious eyes never left the face of the

slight, boyish figure in gray that confronted her.

“Tell me, please, what happened last night.”

A bit surprised at the whispered question, Molly Ardmore gripped the arms of the chair firmly and, as she began, Lorraine made mental note of those frail, childish hands.

“There’s — there’s nothing much. I was awakened by a — by a terrible shriek. I — I recognized her voice. Putting on my kimona, I rushed to the door. My mind was slow — I had slept so soundly, but I could see the light streaming across the first stairs from her — from her reading-room. But she always reads late, she sleeps — slept so poorly.” Molly’s lips whitened as she changed the tense of her verb. With an effort she proceeded. “When — when I reached the threshold, I — I looked in and saw h-her.”

“Did you see the knife?”

“Y-yes, and — and — her face. I — I was numb, almost frozen with horror. My voice wouldn’t come. Then — then Lee stood at my elbow. Later I found myself back in my own room with Sally putting me to bed.”

“You were at the door when you heard her call?” Lorraine’s voice was low and even, as she asked the question.

“I was in bed when I heard her shriek.” Her voice was expressionless.

“How did you know she wanted you?”

“I—I thought I heard her call my name.”

“When you heard the shriek?”

“N-no; just before I opened my door.”

“What did she say?”

“I—I am not sure, but I thought I heard ‘Molly’.”

“Just once?”

“No—several times.”

“This aroused you from your sleep?”

“No—no. The first shriek awakened me.”

“How many shrieks were there?”

“Why—I mean, the first sound I heard was a shriek. Then, before I got to my door, I thought I heard her call my name.”

What was it that Lorraine saw mirrored in the wide eyes with the heavy purple shadows beneath? Was it dread of the next question? There was certainly the hunted look that she had once seen in the eyes of a kitten which a terrier had treed. Or was it the ghastly picture of the tragedy which she could not forget?

“You heard nothing but your name in the words?”

Lorraine’s voice was stern.

“W-what do you mean?”

Suddenly the detective stood up and looked at her intently.

“You heard —” the hollow whisper accused her, “— ‘Molly, Molly, don’t knife me!’”

Molly Ardmore slipped out of her chair upon the floor, sprawling at Lorraine’s feet in a faint. A touch of the bell brought Sally.

“Bring ammonia and water.”

Lorraine stooped and straightened the figure, elevating the feet by a thick book from the table. An angry-faced Sally returned to glare at the two masculine figures in the room. Then she applied the restoratives.

“You’re a cold fish,” whispered Gray as the two stood by a window awaiting Molly’s recovery.

“It was a cold murder,” retorted Lorraine. “The girl knew what her aunt had called. Her fainting proves that. But she was afraid to incriminate herself. Fear causes many a blunder. Molly Ardmore’s withholding of those condemning words would convict her before any ordinary jury. Why won’t people tell the whole truth!”

Gray shook his head. “It’s a bad business. You can’t tell anything by appearances either. Maybe she *is* a Jekyll and Hyde, but she looks more like a child with her tiny hands.”

Instantly both thought of the feeble blow which had ended the life of the woman in the next room.

"You may go on with your inquisition," the weak voice of Molly Ardmore called to them. Again she seated herself in the chair, paler than ever.

"You may go, Sally," she told the maid.

Protesting and grumbling, the maid left the room.

"Why did you not tell me the whole truth?" Lorraine's glance had softened.

"I — I was afraid. Her — her voice appealing to me like that — and then to find her so! I knew what anyone must think. But I didn't do it! I didn't do it!" Her voice rose in a wail.

"If you did not, nothing shall hurt you," Lorraine's whisper was earnest, "for I shall not rest until I find the murderer of that helpless old woman."

Gray's lips had a cynical twist as his mind roved over the years. How many people had faced overwhelming evidence — had even paid the penalty occasionally — and then — the real criminal had been found — too late. Did Lancaster believe her guilty? And the housekeeper's account of the mysterious white-robed fig-

ure! Was that story merely the effort of a loyal servant to shield her young mistress? Had the housekeeper too heard the accusing words? Gray shrugged his shoulders. He was glad that Lancaster had been brought into the matter.

"You must answer my questions with the entire truth. If you are innocent, and I most certainly hope I may prove you so, you must keep back nothing. On the other hand, if you are not, I warn you that anything you may say will be used against you."

"Ask me anything you like," the trembling voice retorted.

"How long have you slept next door to your aunt?"

"O-only for a few weeks — just since I came home from college."

"You used to sleep upstairs?"

"Yes."

"Why did you change to a downstairs room?"

If possible, Molly Ardmore turned a shade paler.

"Because — because," she faltered, "I didn't think it was safe for my aunt to sleep downstairs alone."

"What did you fear?"

“Why — er — she was getting old and — and she might be taken ill suddenly in the night with no one near to help her.”

“Why didn’t her maid occupy that room?”

“Aunt Rebecca was — was opinionated. She — she didn’t think that she needed anyone.”

“Then you didn’t take the room at her suggestion.”

“No.”

“Did you yourself insist?”

“Why — yes — and it was some days before I could persuade her to let me change.”

The faintest line appeared in Lorraine’s smooth forehead, but she went on.

“When did you see the *yellow* crosses on the wall?”

“I didn’t see any crosses.”

“Did you notice a draught when you stood in front of her door?”

“Why,” very slowly, “I was terribly cold and shivery — and everything.”

“Did you notice whether the library door was open?”

“I don’t know. I saw nothing but the light and — h-her.”

“Do you think any one else heard her last words?”

“Must I answer?”

"As you think best."

"I—I think Lee Normand must have heard. He—he acts so strangely."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, he seems so shocked—and—looks at me so queerly."

"Has he said anything to you about them?"

"No."

"Could any one else have heard them?"

"I don't know," desperately.

"Do you know whether your aunt has made a will?"

"Oh, yes. It is with her lawyers."

"When was it drawn?"

"The last one when I was home at Christmas time. That's how I happened to know about it."

"Do you know its contents?"

"She told us. The bulk of everything is divided between Mr. Normand and myself."

Lorraine paused, thoughtfully.

Gray shifted uneasily at his note-taking.

"I suppose you always had a generous allowance?"

"Oh, yes, indeed."

"Your father and mother are both dead?"

"Yes."

"Of what did they die?"

"Both died of pneumonia when I was very young."

"You have lived with your aunt since their death?"

"Yes."

"Then you can answer this question. Did your aunt ever fear anybody or anything? Had she any enemies?"

"Of course, she wasn't afraid or she wouldn't have slept on the first floor always. I never knew of any enemies."

"Had your aunt ever had a serious illness?"

The girl reflected. "Only occasional attacks of the grippe and some gout. She has been singularly well."

Again Gray stirred uneasily.

"When she was ill with the grippe did her temperature run high?"

"No."

"She was never delirious at these times?"

"Never."

"You said it was Miss Ardmore's habit to read late in the room where she died?"

"Yes."

"She was troubled with insomnia?"

"Why, yes. That is — she found that she could sleep better by reading until she became tired."

Lorraine paused, to phrase her next question carefully. "Did she ever fall asleep in her chair while reading?"

"Why, yes, sometimes."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've tried to have her on my mind recently. When she sat up unusually late, I have sometimes peeked in on her to be sure she was all right."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Have you ever known her to have troubled dreams, nightmare, and to cry out in her sleep?"

Molly Ardmore thought soberly.

"No," she sighed, "I never did."

Gray's strained attention at this question relaxed. He tapped his book in a hopeless sort of way.

"Did any one ever sleep on the first floor before you moved down?"

"Sally did when Aunt Rebecca was ill. She slept in the reading-room with the door open into the bedroom."

Lorraine wrote quickly.

"Is there anything you wish to tell me?" she whispered.

Molly hesitated.

“I didn’t do it — oh, I didn’t do it! Don’t you — can’t you believe me?”

Lorraine smiled sadly. “I am unable to say yet. I have nothing more to ask you now. Please send Sally to me.”

The door closed quietly.

Gray muttered as he slowly shut his book. “There isn’t a jury in the world who would return a verdict of ‘not guilty.’ Her own story would convict her.”

Chapter IX

A SPEAKING SILENCE

After a pause Gray asked bluntly, "Do you think she is guilty?"

"I'm not allowing myself to pass judgment yet. You know how her story would affect the average jury. I'm simply trying to get the facts together without prejudice, without permitting myself to sympathize. If I had any definite idea now, it would be because I had been prematurely influenced by insufficient data. When I'm ready I will answer you — it may be hours — it may be days — or even weeks."

Sally's knock prevented any further conversation.

The maid had in no way changed her opinion of "them detectives." She bristled with hostility, as she plumped herself in the chair her mistress had just vacated. She frowned at Gray and glared at the slender figure before her. Then she folded her hands resignedly and scowled at the floor.

“What told you that something unusual had occurred last night?”

“I heard someone moving on the third floor. I went out to look and then heard voices downstairs. Then I went down.”

“Whom did you find?”

“Miss Molly, Mr. Lee and the cook.”

“What did you see?”

“Just all of them acting queer.”

“Was the door closed into the little reading-room?”

“Her room? Yes.”

“Who told you what had happened?”

“I think it was the cook. I don't remember.”

“What was Miss Molly doing?”

“Why, just standing sort of dazed and crazy-like. They all were.”

“Do you remember anything anyone said?”

“Nothing in particular, until Mr. Lee told me to take Miss Molly to her room, put her to bed, and make her comfortable.”

“How did he say it?”

“Sort of automatic like.”

“What was Miss Molly wearing?”

“A red kimona over her nightrobe.”

“You took off her kimona and put her to bed?”

“Yes, sir.”

"She seemed frightened?"

"Of course."

"Did her face look rather blue and her hands colorless?"

"Just that, sir."

"How did you happen to notice her hands?"

"Humph," was the disdainful reply. "How could I help it! Didn't I bathe her poor hands and head with bay rum and try to soothe her?"

"When?" The whisper was shot so suddenly that Sally jumped.

"As soon as I got her to bed. She was almost fainting."

"Did her hands show the marks of the nails as though she had clinched them?"

A glint of amazement crept into the girl's face. "That they did, sir, pressed in so that red showed."

"There was blood on her hands?"

Sally looked frightened. "Oh, no, sir, not that. There wasn't a drop of blood on her hands. I swear it. She had just kept her hands shut so tight that the nails made red marks against the palms. The skin wasn't broken, sir."

Very painstakingly Lorraine made a note, while the maid stared apprehensively.

"There was nothing else on her hands?"

“No, sir, nothing.”

“Miss Molly has always slept downstairs next to her aunt?”

“No, sir.”

“How long has she slept there?”

“Just a few weeks, since she came home this last time.”

“You mean,” queried Lorraine, “that she slept there all the time since she came home?”

The maid considered.

“The first week or so she did not.”

“How did she happen to move downstairs?”

“Devotion to her aunt, sir. She was afraid she might be ill, or something.”

“Why didn’t you sleep downstairs near Miss Ardmore?”

“Miss Rebecca didn’t want me to, sir. It was often suggested to her.”

“But she preferred Miss Molly?”

“I suppose so. You see, she was so fond of Miss Molly that she would do anything to please her.”

“You mean that Miss Molly influenced her largely?”

Something about the question disturbed the maid. She hesitated before she answered.

“Miss Rebecca was fond of Miss Molly and loved to please her.”

Lorraine let this answer pass. "Was Miss Rebecca ever ill?"

"Once in a great while, sir."

"With what?"

"Heavy colds and rheumatism."

"Did you have a nurse at those times?"

"No, sir. I slept downstairs in the room next to hers."

"The one Miss Molly now occupies?"

"No, sir. There is no door between those two rooms. I slept—in there." She jerked her head towards the adjoining room.

"I suppose you had to take her temperature when she was ill?"

"She never had any temperature to speak of. Always cool and quiet, even when she didn't feel well."

"She was never out of her head then?"

"Never," emphatically.

"Of course, she was restless sometimes at night and slept badly?"

"Yes."

"Did she ever moan, and toss, and talk?"

"Never. She never made much of her sickness. She never groaned or made a time. Of course, she was restless."

"What do you mean by that?"

"She couldn't get to sleep."

"Then she was never troubled with nightmare, so that she cried out?"

"I never heard her."

"I suppose you took the handkerchief from Miss Molly's hands when you put her to bed?"

"I didn't see any handkerchief, sir. There was nothing in her hands before or after I put her to bed."

"Very well, Sally. I won't ask you any more questions now."

Much distressed by the whole affair, the maid left the room, the perturbed look on her honest face plainly indicating that she hoped she had said nothing to harm Miss Molly.

"Pretty clean-cut corroboration," commented Gray. "Whom do you want next? The poet?"

"Yes, Mr. Normand." The strain was already beginning to tell on that apology for a voice of hers.

"You look rather played out," observed Gray as he left the room.

Lorraine improved this opportunity by re-examining the window carefully, even fitting the four-inch circle of glass into position. What she discovered evidently satisfied her. She seated herself again in readiness. A faint smile curved her lips as she gazed down at her fas-

tidious patent leathers. Their perfect fit in no wise suggested the inner soles and the extra pairs of socks which had brought this about.

Gray ushered in a tall, thin young man, whom he introduced briefly.

Normand was about thirty, Lorraine judged. He wore his hair long and affected a Van Dyke. He was rather distinguished-looking, with an intellectual, thoroughbred face and carefully kept hands. He was wearing tweeds and somehow, this light suit annoyed Lorraine. It seemed so out of keeping in that house of mourning. But she instantly dismissed the idea as unjust and irrelevant.

Normand bit his lips nervously, intently awaiting her first words. He impressed Lorraine as one braced for a blow.

"Mr. Gray has told me what you narrated to him. Have you anything to add to or to subtract from that?"

"Nothing to add," the cultured voice answered. "But I did make one obtuse statement. I believe, Mr. Gray, that I told you that Miss Ardmore was coming from her aunt's room when I first saw her from the stairs."

Gray nodded curtly.

"That was perhaps a misleading statement," Normand explained earnestly. "I meant that

Miss Ardmore was stepping away from the door. I have no knowledge that she had entered. She may have stood just at the threshold, transfixed by the sight as I was. When I first saw her she was perhaps a foot away from the doorway."

"In which direction was she walking?"

"Straight towards the stairs."

"Did you see her hands?"

"Yes, they were clinched before her. The first thing I noted was the whiteness of her hands against the bright red of her gown. It seemed so unnatural and so strange."

"You saw her bare hands clinched before her, so — ?" Lorraine enacted the words.

"No, like this," Normand showed her, his hands near his heart.

"When did you first see your aunt?"

"When I was half way down the stairs, I should judge. They are opposite her room."

"Did you see the handle of the knife from the stairs?"

"No, not until I stood on the threshold."

"You closed the door before the servants arrived?"

"Yes."

"Miss Molly stopped when she saw you?"

"Yes."

"She stood in practically the same position until you sent Sally to her room with her?"

"Yes."

"What did you tell the servants?"

"Simply that my aunt had been stabbed — that she was dead."

"How did you know she was dead?"

The question was sudden — sharp.

Normand shuddered. "By her face."

"Yet you made no move to aid her in case she were only severely hurt?"

"I tell you I knew she was dead."

"Why did you call the doctor then?"

"I supposed the doctor and the police were the people I should call."

"And you made no move to feel her pulse; you had no hope that she was not dead?"

Norman paled. "The sight was so horrible — But it would have done no good, even had I possessed the nerve to do it. The doctor said she must have died instantly."

"You accompanied him into the room?"

"I had to."

"Was everything else in the room the same as usual?"

"As far as I could note. Of course, I am not a criminal investigator." A touch of disdain crept into the well modulated voice.

"You saw no marks of any kind, I suppose?"

"No."

"You recognized the stiletto?"

"Yes."

"Where did you see it last?"

"On the library table."

"When was that?"

"Last evening. I was looking up some references relative to the Cavalier Poets of England. The paperknife lay on the table where I consulted my volumes."

"What time did you leave the library?"

"Between nine and ten."

"Did any one else enter the library last evening after that?"

"No one to my knowledge, except Miss Barton, the housekeeper."

"Does she lock the house?"

"Yes."

"Did she lock it last night?"

"Naturally."

"How do you know?"

"She told me so when I asked her this morning."

"You've been questioning the servants?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

Normand was growing restive.

“What time did Miss Barton lock the window?”

“Promptly at ten, according to her habit.”

“What else did she tell you?”

“The story of the murderer whom she saw.”

“You’re rather dramatic. What do you mean?”

“The white-garbed woman, whom the moonlight revealed crouching in the shadow.”

Lorraine paused. Her next questions merely verified the stories told by Molly and Sally, viz: that Molly had but recently taken the downstairs room next to her aunt’s; that undoubtedly she had been instrumental in bringing about this change; that the older woman fairly worshipped her niece, and that the best of good feeling existed between them.

Lorraine shut her book as though at an end with her questions. The taut figure of Normand relaxed and a bit of color crept into his pale face. He stirred as though to depart.

“Just one or two more questions,” whispered Lorraine, casually.

Gray leaned forward. He knew that the very carelessness of the detective cloaked a more important move.

Half stifling a yawn Lorraine asked, “What other servants did you question?”

"All of them."

"What did the cook say?"

Lorraine followed this question by putting away her notebook.

Norman's voice had become mechanical and expressionless. "The cook heard the noise, that is to say, she heard indications that something wasn't right. So she came downstairs to investigate and found us."

"She was probably awakened by the same cries which aroused you?"

He looked at his questioner intently. "Possibly," he answered.

"And what was it that aroused you?"

"A terrible shriek."

"What else did you hear your aunt say?"

"I don't understand you."

"Oh, yes, you do. Will you swear that you heard nothing at all but the one shriek?"

Lee Normand paused, paling perceptibly. "I prefer not to answer that question."

"Think carefully. Your answer may irrevocably hurt — the one you are trying to protect. Are you sure that you have nothing else to say?"

"I — I —" Normand was white to the lips, "I prefer not to answer that question."

Chapter X

THE HOUSEKEEPER'S STORY

Lorraine's face showed no surprise. She looked idly toward the window as though something outside had attracted her attention. Gray tried to decide what direction her investigations would take next.

"Mr. Normand," the interrogator's voice whispered, "this answer on your part leads to one conclusion. I fear you have but little faith in the story of the white-robed woman. I have nothing more to ask you at present."

Bowing slightly, Normand withdrew.

"You look all in," observed Gray. "Why don't you call a halt for a while?"

"That is just what I am going to do. My voice is pretty tired, and—I want to look around some more."

"For what?"

"Molly Ardmore is known to have moved only a short distance from the next door, and between that room and her own."

"You mean," recognized Gray, "that you want to look for the gloves?"

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"I don't insist upon gloves. A handkerchief would have answered the purpose just as well and as effectively concealed any fingerprints."

"Anybody is likely to leave a handkerchief about."

"True, but the handkerchief I seek will show faint signs of red chalk."

Gray followed the alert figure and watched intently. The famous investigator poked about in the queerest places. The same painstaking scrutiny extended from the stairs down the corridor, pausing before Molly Ardmore's room. Nothing rewarded the searcher.

"You'll have to question Miss Molly and Sally again in the library. I must examine this room," Lorraine told Gray.

As she knocked lightly on the door, Sally answered. Lorraine whispered her request. After the two women had followed Gray she softly closed the door into the room.

A magnificent oriental rug covered the polished floor. A four poster bed and rich mahogany pieces furnished the room. The two windows opened beyond the veranda. A large closet and dressing-room occupied the side farthest from the aunt's room.

Defly Lorraine examined everything. She

even gave close attention to the reading-light on the mahogany desk. Once an important clue had been placed inside the hollow standard of just such a light. But there was no evidence here. Either Molly Ardmore was the cleverest of criminals or the hapless victim of overwhelming circumstantial evidence. It was the first time in all Lorraine's experience that the criminal hadn't left some clue. Once a few pieces of green had supplied the missing link — another time a cracked handmirror had been the first step. But thus far the Ardmore murder offered absolutely no clue. Strange that the perpetrator, even with such extraordinary cunning, hadn't forgotten some one thing!

Closing the door, Lorraine returned to the library. Gray seemed glad to cut short his questions and to dismiss the unhappy women.

“Well,” he asked, “has the handkerchief developed?”

“No.”

“What do you make of it?”

“I'm not ready to say yet. Meanwhile let us interview the cook. My voice has had a rest.”

This servant came reluctantly.

The sober face of this distressed member of

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the household watched the two detectives helplessly.

"I've told him all I know," she protested, nodding at Gray.

"There are just a few other things," Lorraine's whisper told her. "Where were you when you heard Miss Ardmore's cry of distress?"

"In — in the upper hall. I had gone from my room for hot water."

"Where was the hot water?"

"There was none in our bath-room, so I went to the one at the end of the hall."

"Near the head of the stairs on the third floor?"

"Yes — yes."

"You looked over the banister when you heard the cry?"

"I did."

"What did you see?"

"Nothing. It was too dark."

"Where was Mr. Normand when you first saw him?"

"Near the bottom of the first flight."

"Was Miss Molly near the door of the reading-room?"

"Yes."

"How near?"

"I don't know."

"Where were you that you could see them so plainly?"

"On the second floor at the head of the stairs."

"So you had come down to investigate?"

"Of course."

"Now tell me exactly what you heard your mistress say."

The cook's lips twitched. Her face began to quiver. She seized her apron and covered her head. Her shoulders shook convulsively.

Through her sobs she stammered, "Wh— why do I have to say it again?"

"You don't. Miss Rebecca Ardmore first shrieked and then cried out, 'Molly, Molly, don't knife me!' Is that correct?"

"Yes, oh, yes. But— she must have been mad— crazy— off her head."

"Were the words very clear?"

"Yes."

Lorraine dismissed the sobbing cook. She frowned thoughtfully in the pause which ensued and wrote busily.

"We might as well see the housekeeper now."

Miss Barton was long in coming. Evidently her duties had taken her to some remote part of the house. She proved to be a middle-aged

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woman with a strong, intelligent face. Her eyes were frank and clear. In fact, everything about her seemed to breath capability and honesty.

"It is your duty to lock the house?"

"Yes." The answer was straight-forward and unwavering. Miss Barton showed no uneasiness. There was poise about her, a suggestion of strength.

"You locked the library windows last night?"

"Yes, at ten."

"How do you know it was ten?"

"Because I saw the clock on the mantle. I always try to be punctual in my rounds of the house." The voice was dignified, certain.

"The hole had not been cut in the window near the table?"

"No, indeed. I should have noticed it with the lights on."

"What time did you retire?"

"About half past ten."

"Did you fall asleep directly?"

"I think so — until something disturbed me, and I got up to sit in the dark by the window."

"What disturbed you?"

"I thought it was the heat, so I sat by the open window."

"How soon did you fancy you saw something in the shadow of the tree?"

"Almost immediately."

"Was your window open?"

"Yes."

"Was it screened?"

"No, I had taken out the screen to get more air."

"Did you hear anything when you fancied you saw something?"

"Nothing at all."

"Tell me exactly what you saw."

Miss Barton's voice was firm, decided. "I saw a tall woman in white in the shadow of the tree nearest my window. As I looked at her, she seemed to be swallowed up by the shadow. I mean the white suddenly faded. Then, as I strained my eyes, a black figure crept from tree to tree until I lost sight of it."

"How did you know it was a woman?"

"I saw her white dress."

"Suppose we go up to your room. Then you can point out the tree and other things."

The housekeeper's room was a pleasant, large one at the rear of the second floor. It was tastefully furnished, and there were two windows overlooking the grounds. Lorraine's eyes narrowed as she saw a newspaper open at the

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account of the mysterious woman in the Drift affair.

"Yes," commented Miss Barton, following her glance, "I shouldn't wonder if it were the same one."

Without replying Lorraine asked, "Where did you sit?"

The housekeeper pointed to a straight-backed chair by the nearest window.

Lorraine seated herself in it, questioning, "Was it this first tree here?"

The tree stood about fifteen feet from the corner of the house. Its trunk was generous in girth, the foliage heavy.

"Yes, I saw her right there at the left of that tree."

Miss Barton was decisive.

As Lorraine studied the spot she noted the closely cropped grass growing everywhere, even up to the trunk of the tree. She sighed as she recalled the early shower which would so effectively blot out any corroborating marks on the grass.

"In which direction did the figure move?"

Very exactly the housekeeper pointed out the course, tree by tree. The trees were so close together that such a performance would have been easily possible. And beyond the high iron

fence grew a heavy hedge. It was an ideal route for any one desiring concealment.

"What influenced you to go down stairs after fancying you saw this figure?"

"I didn't fancy it. I *saw* it." The voice was firm, but not angry. "I thought I heard movements or something, nothing very definite. But after seeing the figure, I was uneasy."

"Whom did you find?"

"Everyone in the house. You know the rest of the story."

"Where was your chauffeur?"

"Neither he nor the gardener lives in the house."

Lorraine set down the address of each, querying, "You have no other servants?"

"No, we are short a maid. Kate, who has been with us for years was called away by the serious illness of her mother."

"When did she go?"

"A week ago. She was one of the best servants I ever knew, so I have not filled her place, hoping she may soon return."

Lorraine took down the girl's address.

"Thank you, Miss Barton," she whispered.

"We won't trouble you longer."

On the way back to the library, Gray asked, "Do you think she really saw it, or is she

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merely making up the yarn to help the girl?"

"I am not yet ready to say."

Throwing up the library window, Lorraine stepped out. "I'll be back presently." She dismissed Gray.

She sighed with relief as she breathed the fresh air. The gloom of the house was depressing. The playing of her role, too, had fatigued her unbelievably. For a few minutes she stood quietly thinking out the most obvious course of a possible intruder. Then she swung over the piazza railing, dropping lightly on the grass. Rose-bushes extended the entire distance to a point opposite the all-important tree. She walked along, examining every foot of the way, and paused at the rear corner of the house. She accurately gauged the distance to that nearest trunk. As she took the position under the tree described by Miss Barton, she knew that no traces would reward her search. If only that rain had not fallen!

From trunk to trunk, she crept until the last one sheered into the fence backed by the hedge. Any possible clue on the iron fence was lacking. There was no tallying bit to Miss Barton's story. Lorraine examined the hedge closely for some sign of a broken twig. But search as she would, nothing rewarded her efforts. And

beyond the hedge lay a broad sidewalk, freshly washed by the shower. She was at a standstill.

She returned to the library window and stepped within. Gray was dumbfounded to see her stand, poised on one foot, glancing at a thin watch on a silk fob. Then the gray figure leaped out of the window, cleared the railing and kept close to the house. It made its first pause by the tree trunk, making a few gestures as through throwing on a wrap. Then it stole from trunk to trunk, never pausing until it arrived at the fence.

"How long did it take you?" inquired Gray, who had followed more slowly.

"Three minutes and two seconds. But I am weak and clumsy from my cold. A fugitive could have done it in much less time."

"Then you do believe that woman yarn?"

"Lack of evidence has forstalled any conclusion yet," whispered Lorraine. "I have found nothing—not so much as a broken twig on the hedge."

"It certainly looks bad for the girl," Gray affirmed.

"Yet I know the glass was cut from the outside," stated Lorraine. "Of course, it would be quite possible for the clever criminal we know the murderer to have been to have cov-

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ered his moves by cutting the glass from the outside, even though he were a member of the household. I shall have to go home and think it all over. I'm terribly tired, and I can't do anything more here anyway."

Gray watched the slight figure of Lancaster wearily descend the steps and stiffly climb into the brown roadster. He saw the disturbed expression on the face as the car started slowly.

"Lancaster has his hands full and knows it," thought the man from headquarters.

Chapter XI

THE WOMAN IN WHITE

All the way home Lorraine weighed, sifted and discarded. Never had she faced such an unpromising beginning. If only she could have found a scratch—some one thing from which to work! The case was so obvious, now that three people had heard the slain woman's incriminating words. To the lay mind, the very simplicity of the facts would make the affair seem elementary. To her mind this was the most difficult phase of the whole business.

It was a relief to don a cool, thin dress. Even the wig, which Martha had fashioned with such care, seemed welcome. After she had devoured a hearty lunch Lorraine glanced over the last extra, already several hours old. Anything for a chance to relax now!

She smiled as she read the flamboyant account of the housekeeper's story. The rewrite man had played it for all it was worth. He had described the mysterious white-robed woman and the similarity of her entrance to

that effected at Jeremiah Drift's residence. After many theories and surmises, he had ended that "the police, assisted by Mr. Paul Lancaster, were rapidly getting at the bottom of the affair and had promised an arrest shortly." No mention had yet been made of the all-important words. Evidently Gray, always with an eye to the dramatic, was holding that for the sensational arrest.

Martha entered. "There's a lady waiting in the office to see Mr. Paul on important business."

A bit curious, Lorraine descended quickly. She found a tall woman attired with inconspicuous elegance. Her handsome, aristocratic face contemplated Lorraine with surprise.

"I—I called to see Mr. Paul Lancaster," a musical voice stated.

"I am sorry, but my brother can not possibly be seen. He has a frightful cold, and is completely fatigued by his extra work on an important case. I work with him and should be very glad to bring anything to his attention as soon as possible. Won't I do?"

Slowly the visitor seated herself, apparently weighing Lorraine's words.

"You—you would promise absolute secrecy?"

“Naturally, as I work with him on all his cases.”

“This is profoundly important,” the visitor assured her. “I am Sylvia Langdon, of whom you may have heard.” There was no egotism in the words.

Lorraine had heard of Sylvia Langdon. She knew that this English writer had come to America recently and had often been interviewed. She recalled the remarks of certain critics, ascribing to Miss Langdon’s work extraordinary merit and charm.

“Of course I have heard of you, Miss Langdon,” Lorraine acknowledged, smiling, completely at a loss to account for her visitor’s presence.

Miss Langdon was plainly becoming agitated.

“I am neither a criminal nor insane,” she faltered, “but — I — I am the woman in white who entered the Drift residence Monday night.”

She drew in her breath sharply as she watched Lorraine’s face.

“What do you mean?” Lorraine asked quickly and her surprised glance rested upon a little pearl button with its finely incised coat-of-arms and its mysterious S. L.

"I mean just what I say, and I am becoming horribly afraid of the consequences of my silly role."

"'Silly,'" repeated Lorraine, "I should hardly apply that adjective."

The English woman flushed but hastened to add:

"Wait until I tell you the whole story. I wore a plain white dress, white mask and gloves."

Lorraine glanced at her fair hair. "Mr. Drift's visitor had black hair," she suggested.

"Of course, I wore a wig—"

"—and was stout," insisted Lorraine, watching the clean-cut, striking face in which were both beauty and strength.

"Make-up—padding," was the laconic reply, "to make my disguise more effective and mysterious. My costume was simple, including a long black coat and a plain little bonnet. To protect myself I added a small red cross to my left arm while in the street. I selected the Drift house because of the shrubbery surrounding it. The shadows simplified my task. My glass-cutter and my rubber-suction-cup made the cutting of the window well-nigh noiseless. Mr. Drift was asleep. He opened his eyes upon a spectral figure. I knew what the reaction would be. Fear made him helpless. Before

he could recover speech or strength, I had gagged him and bound him to his chair."

"I know the rest," remarked Lorraine quietly.

"W-what!" stammered her visitor.

"Mr. Drift consulted my brother before leaving for Chicago. May I ask, Miss Langdon, the motive for such an act?"

The delicate face flushed painfully. "I — I know my explanation sounds incredible — I — I wanted to get copy — from my own experiences — for a novel."

Lorraine's next question came immediately, incisively, "Don't you specialize in fanciful fairy lore?"

"I — I did, until I was forced to change my style."

"Why?"

Miss Langdon stirred uneasily. Her hands fluttered in her lap. "Because," her low voice wavered, "my work is not paying well financially. People want thrillers — not imaginative fancy. My publishers suggested a change to meet popular demand."

Lorraine stared at her in unfeigned amazement. Swiftly her thoughts coursed over the flattering paragraphs of the critics. It never had occurred to her that sheer merit might not

bring a deserved pecuniary reward. Of course, Poe had starved in a garret, selling his *Raven* for a pitiful ten dollars, but presumably those benighted days had passed.

"Were you contemplating a *Lady Burglar* series?"

"Something of the sort," Miss Langdon admitted.

The whole appearance of the woman, everything about her, seemed so in conflict with her confession. Yet she had given details which no newspaper had published. Her intimate knowledge of the facts could not be gainsaid.

"But why, why," demanded Lorraine, "did you ruin that room with malicious red crosses?"

A flush of color swept over Miss Langdon's white face.

"I—I wanted to add mystery—make it seem weird and inexplicable."

"Um—," Lorraine's voice was noncommittal. "Where did you put the circle of glass?"

"In the white bag I wore about my waist. In it also were all the other tricks of my trade." She smiled half whimsically.

"Where did you learn how to make such a clean-cut circle?"

Again Miss Langdon smiled. "I practiced until I could."

"Where did you buy your stuff?"

"In — in England."

Lorraine's voice revealed her surprise as she asked, "You — you mean to tell me that you came to America prepared to undertake this incredible adventure?"

"Just that. Had I bought anything here, I feared the cleverness of Mr. Paul Lancaster's sleuthing."

The visitor smiled in strained fashion.

A sudden expression of pain crossed Lorraine's face. She twisted quickly and grasped her right wrist with a moan.

Thoroughly alarmed Miss Langdon sprang to her feet. "What is it? Oh, what is it? Are you ill?"

Gasping painfully, Lorraine whispered, "It's my wrist. I threw it out of joint. Won't you — won't you give it a quick, strong pull, please? I can't do it with my left hand."

With sympathy and alarm clouding her face, Sylvia Langdon acquiesced. Pulling off her glove, she carefully followed Lorraine's instructions. Once she tried, twice, three times. Still the pained expression remained on Lorraine's face.

"Harder — harder," the suffering girl implored. "Now, with all your might — Ah,"

she gasped in evident relief. "Thank you, thank you so much."

"You are sure I shouldn't call some one?" Miss Langdon inquired solicitously.

"Oh, I am all right now. I suppose," resuming her questioning, "that you know you are guilty of breaking and entering, of the malicious destruction of property, among other things?"

"Yes, yes, but I am willing to pay handsomely."

A flash lighted Lorraine's dark eyes.

"Pay," she echoed sarcastically, "pay, even as—some one attempted to pay the Hartmans—"

Sylvia Langdon didn't even seem surprised.

"I was coming to that," she stated in a matter-of-fact tone. "Your brother was evidently retained in that case also."

Suspicion clouded Lorraine's eyes. "Go on."

"That—that was my initial bow. "I—I wore my red wig then, and appeared in my natural form, with a mask of course. I—I figured that variation would enhance the bizarreness of my visits—make them seem like a band of mysterious women, strangely bound together by some mystic motives and rites."

Lorraine's half-closed eyes were gazing

beyond the confessor. Many things were darting through her alert mind.

“And why did you slit the red-bound books?”

“Simply to add mystery — to make my visit seem like the strange quest for some hidden thing.”

Lorraine's glance calmly studied the woman before her. Familiar as she was with all types of people, with the indices of character, she could find nothing amiss in the face before her. Even the ears were no longer hidden, — beautiful, shell-like ears they were, the heritage of blue-blooded ancestry. Her glance fell upon her wrist and a little frown appeared between her eyes. It was all so melodramatic! It seemed incredible that a writer would go to such lengths — yet *her* speciality was detection, not fiction. Certainly Sylvia Langdon's story was straightforward enough. And the facts she had stated were known to no outsider. Only the principal in such an episode could possess such intimate knowledge.

Suddenly Lorraine drew out an envelope from her little brown book.

“Even the most carefully laid plans sometimes leave incriminating souvenirs.” She held out the pearl button in the envelope.

Narrowly she noted the careless way in which the bare fingers grasped the polished surface of the smooth linen envelope.

“I—I feared there might be something,” admitted the English woman in apparent relief at the sight of the little button.

Lorraine held out her hand. “I shall have to keep this silent witness for the present.”

“But—but you will be careful of it? You haven’t shown it to any one?”

“It has not been shown,” was the convincing reply.

Very deftly, with her finger-tips touching only the edges of the envelope, Lorraine deposited it between clean pages of her note-book.

“Your story,” she said slowly, “has presented some contradictory features. Just what I do not care to say. Furthermore, it is contrary to your entire character to go to such lengths. You are guilty of common, everyday burglary. On that score, as well as on the score of assault and battery, you could be arrested. That such a woman as you should take such risks with the attendant publicity—”

At the word “publicity,” Sylvia Langdon hastily, fearfully, interrupted. “Oh, that’s just it! That has been my nightmare and my horror! I can’t get away from it! I would

give anything to blot out the white-robed woman — publicity would kill me. Why, I loathe it, I detest it! And the shame of such a story — in — in staring black headlines. It positively makes me faint!” Her face was convulsed with feeling.

Lorraine’s eyes opened at this outburst. “Then you were not contemplating a jail sentence to swell your copy? Why didn’t you think of that before?”

The English woman’s face was very pale. “If — if I only had!”

“But there are some glaring discrepancies which I cannot ignore,” insisted Lorraine. “What further proof can you give me?”

Sylvia Langdon smiled with relief. Slowly she fumbled within her elegant, hand-bag, then brought out a long packet.

“*Here,*” she said, “*are the papers s-stolen from Jeremiah Drift.*”

Chapter XII

MOLLY ARDMORE IS ACCUSED

They were the identical papers, signed and sealed. To Lorraine those red seals seemed like clots of blood.

"If you wished to make reparation," she asked, "why didn't you return these papers to Mr. Drift as you mailed those five \$100 bills to Miss Hartman?"

"I didn't dare mail anything so important, especially since I saw that he had gone to Chicago. I thought I could give them to Mr. Lancaster with a suitable sum and have him act as go-between, without disclosing my identity."

"Um," observed Lorraine, thoughtfully. "There is nothing mysterious about thieving. Why did you take the papers anyway? Experience, not robbery, was your supposed motive."

"I—I," Sylvia Langdon hesitated, "I wanted the black-haired woman to add a new feature."

"But why did you wait so long before com-

ing here? The papers were taken Monday night, and this is Thursday.”

“Because,” the other woman whispered hoarsely, “because I’m afraid of my life. I have seen the papers. There are many hints about a mysterious white-robed woman in connection with the murder at Elsinore Park. I am horribly afraid that I—that I may be accused of that!”

“Yes,” admitted Lorraine flatly, “there is that possibility.”

“But I didn’t do it. I swear to you that I didn’t do it. Why should I confess the other two—things, if I were guilty of this awful crime?”

“Because you were afraid. And you just stated that your sole motive in stealing the papers was to add a new feature. Now another new, stronger feature has been added, murder.”

“But I didn’t do it! I can prove it! I was out of town last night. Only when I returned this morning did I learn of this terrible crime. And—and later came the story of the white-robed woman seen by the housekeeper. And—they—they—say that very possibly it is—it is the same woman who entered the Drift residence. That is what terrified and brought me here. Suppose I had left some clue at the

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Drift house — I never dreamed of the button — circumstantial evidence might involve me in this horrible murder.”

“Very possibly,” was Lorraine’s dry comment. “You say you were out of town last night, and that you can prove it?”

Miss Langdon brightened perceptibly.

“Yes, I left on the eight o’clock train for Rosendale. There I was entertained at the home of Mrs. Madison, at 19 Parkway. I read from my Norse sagas for a few of her friends. They staid late and we had refreshments. We didn’t retire until past one o’clock. I returned to town this morning — to find these terrible accounts.”

“Then why do you fear the accusation of murder? You say you have a perfect alibi. You know the crime was committed shortly after midnight this morning.”

A haunted look crept over Sylvia Langdon’s face. Her reply was halting.

“I — I am afraid of the publicity. Of course, I didn’t commit the murder —” she shuddered, “— but I don’t want my name mentioned even in connection with the affair. It’s the publicity, the publicity.” Her voice was shrill with fear. “I’m frightened nearly to death by the thought of the publicity.”

She gazed pleadingly at Lorraine, who had been watching her closely.

“If you detest publicity so much, why have you been interviewed so frequently?”

The author hesitated, then answered hurriedly, “I—I couldn’t help that. I didn’t want to become unpopular with the American press. I wanted my books to sell. Oh, you do believe me, don’t you?”

Lorraine answered gently:

“One who investigates must never be prematurely prejudiced. I sincerely hope for your sake that Mrs. Madison and her guests will substantiate your story.”

“And—and if she does?” questioned Sylvia Langdon eagerly.

“I don’t know,” Lorraine told her frankly. “I believe and I disbelieve. Surely if I have satisfactory proof that you were at Mrs. Madison’s last night, I shall have to eliminate you from consideration in the Ardmore murder.”

“But the housekeeper’s sworn story?” queried the older woman, fearfully.

“That remains, fortunately or unfortunately.”

“But you will keep my name out of the papers, if you have absolute proof that I was away last night?”

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For a considerable time Lorraine hesitated. Sylvia Langdon watched her breathlessly.

Finally Lorraine said, "For the present, yes. And I promise you, that if I change my mind, I will warn you."

"Why should you change your mind?" was the frightened question.

"I don't know — something unexpected, maybe."

"And you will return the papers to Mr. Drift, without revealing how you obtained them? Of course I will pay you and him anything you say."

Again Lorraine reflected before she answered, "For a writer in financial straits you seem unusually affluent!"

"It's — it's my inheritance from my mother."

"Which is evidently paltry or you wouldn't be driven to such lengths to support your writing!"

Sylvia Langdon did not reply. Again Lorraine paused before answering the question she had ignored.

"For the present, I will promise merely to return the papers to Mr. Drift. I am sure the sight of them will appease his anger. Besides he will be in Chicago for some days yet. Much may happen in the meantime."

Again that haunted look appeared in Sylvia Langdon's face. But she merely said, "I will reimburse him for any pecuniary loss he may have suffered through the theft of the papers."

"Not now," objected Lorraine. "Wait until Mr. Drift returns."

"And you," Sylvia Langdon hurried on, "or rather, your brother, I mean — if a thousand dollars will be satisfactory for your services —"

"A thousand dollars versus publicity," commented Lorraine, "— I think that will be satisfactory."

Sylvia Langdon reached in her bag.

Lorraine held up her hand. "Not now!"

Her guest arose to go.

"You don't know how grateful I am. You have given me hope."

"I trust you have had sufficient experience for your novel."

Sylvia Langdon smiled faintly. "Yes," was all she said as she left the room.

Motionless Lorraine sat for a few moments. Then she proved that the thumb mark on the bristol board which had covered the bills sent to Doris Hartman was identical with the one Sylvia Langdon had so guilelessly left on the envelope when examining her pearl button. This lack of precaution again hardly suggested

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the careful woman in white. Lorraine next turned her attention to the Drift papers. Except for the same finger-prints there were no clues.

Slipping on her motor bonnet, Lorraine went out to the garage. She drove to the post-office where she mailed the papers to Mr. Drift in Chicago. She next entered the nearest telegraph office and wired this message:

*Am sending registered package by
special delivery. No particulars.
Lancaster.*

“I think that will satisfy him,” she thought.

Back home again she gave her attention to the many things awaiting her. She first called up Rosendale. Her heart gave a pleased bound as Mrs. Madison's maid went for her mistress. She wanted Mrs. Madison's testimony immediately.

“Is Miss Langdon still with you?” asked Lorraine.

“No,” the cultivated voice answered. “She returned to town this morning.”

“Oh,” the tone was disappointed. “So soon! Why she arrived only last evening, didn't she?”

"Yes," was the reply. "We were so disappointed that she didn't get here until half past eight. We feared something had prevented her coming at all. And her late arrival retarded my little affair so."

"Any particulars, Mrs. Madison, will be appreciated by the press."

The lady was pleased. "Miss Langdon very graciously read to us until nearly midnight. We were spellbound by her charming personality and the beauty of her fancies. Then a late repast was served."

"It was after midnight."

"And among those present were —" prompted Lorraine with her pencil poised.

Mrs. Madison quickly gave the names of the exclusive few who had been privileged to hear Sylvia Langdon.

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Madison."

Lorraine quickly looked up another number. The guest whom she called corroborated the facts. The same story from another guest clinched the matter.

"Well, Sylvia Langdon," Lorraine concluded, "you have a perfect alibi which eliminates you from the Elsinore Park murder. The housekeeper's story looks more than ever like a made-up yarn to protect Molly Ard-

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more. I am very much afraid that it will not even be considered."

Lorraine next called the American representatives of Sylvia Langdon's publishers. She stated frankly that she was interested in knowing how many editions of Miss Langdon's last book had been printed.

Her fingers tightened around the receiver as the voice responded, "Ten editions of five to ten thousand each."

"The flaw in her story," thought Lorraine as she hung up the receiver.

This statement threw out the confessed motive of financial straits from poor selling books.

If she hadn't gone for copy, as she said, *what* had taken her on such a marauding expedition? While the publishers' report did throw out the lack-of-money side of her story — so at variance with her affluent appearance — still there was a bare possibility that she had sought thus crazily to change her style. Then why hadn't she just kept to that fact without unnecessarily bringing in a lie? Lorraine would have been as well satisfied with the statement that she had thus madly gone in quest of copy.

There was one other debatable discrepancy which disturbed her. Both Doris Hartman

and Jeremiah Drift had mentioned the powerful wrists of their assailant. When Lorraine had feigned a dislocated wrist, it had of course been merely a ruse. And she had learned that Sylvia Langdon had very little strength in her wrists. Still one thing in the story stood out. "Fear made him helpless," she had said of Drift. Lorraine's knowledge of psychology told her that this was entirely possible. Fear could make a weakling of anyone. Could Sylvia Langdon then have easily overpowered him before he recovered? She eliminated Doris from this line of thought. But those tightly lashed cords, and the strongly drawn knots! Sylvia Langdon had left two unsolved questions in her amazing confession.

Lorraine's surmises were interrupted.

"Extra! Extra!" came shrilly through the window. "Latest development in the Ardmore murder!"

As Lorraine called the boy, she knew what she would see.

Yes, there it was — startling black type proclaiming to the world that the police now believed a mere girl had brutally slain her aged aunt! Molly Ardmore had done this terrible thing, the theory was to acquire immediately the money recently willed to her. Her guilt

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seemed established for the last words of the dying woman had actually accused her!

Gray had announced the arrest in an entirely dramatic way.

Chapter XIII

THE RED HAIRED WOMAN AGAIN

While these stirring events were taking place, Jason Lancaster and one Lemuel Paul had arrived at their destination. Paul was a wiry, white-haired, little man with a trig, gray beard, for Paul being a master at disguise, had forgotten nothing in his carefully assumed vacation role. Even his skin had been treated until it had a yellow, shriveled appearance.

Jason Lancaster had strenuously objected to this elaborate plan. But Paul had insisted that some criminal, even in the far West, might recognize him. Then a telegram to Eastern "pals" might precipitate that "wave of crime" Paul so often talked of. Jason Lancaster had laughed in his face, but Paul had remained obdurate. So in the western city Lemuel Paul appeared as an old friend of Jason Lancaster.

Paul was surprised at the size of his uncle's "ranch." The five thousand acres included some of the finest alfalfa land in the west, pro-

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ducing three crops a year. Irrigation eliminated the possibility of drought and the broad acres were a dependable asset. Paul's first shock had come when an eight-cylinder touring-car with a competent chauffeur had awaited them at the station. Somehow, Uncle Jason's commonplace clothes and his careless appearance had not suggested this. Then the fine dwelling, with its many servants, had been another surprise. That a "lone rancher," as his uncle styled himself, should live so comfortably never had occurred to Paul.

Jason Lancaster was evidently a somebody in the West. His ranch was known throughout several states and he was reputed to be a man of wealth and keen judgment. Paul foresaw a comfortable vacation. He had not been there long when he learned the apparent reason for Uncle Jason's sudden invitation. They had returned from a horseback ride over the ranch. Paul rode well, and this pleased his uncle.

"Paul," the old gentleman drawled as they sat in his big smoking room, "I suppose you are wondering why I brought you out here — that is, in addition to your needing a rest."

"Yes," returned Paul, "I've been suspecting some other reason."

The old gentleman regarded him keenly.

"Well," was the quizzical reply, "hasn't your detective sense told you yet?"

Paul laughed shortly. "No," he replied easily.

Jason Lancaster shifted in his chair. He settled himself comfortably, allowing plenty of time to stir Paul's curiosity.

"Well, I've brought you along to run down my little mystery here. Of course, it is probably altogether too simple for your really serious attention, but it's sure got me guessing."

Paul watched his uncle narrowly. "I thought you believed I needed a rest."

Jason Lancaster laughed good-humoredly. "Of course, but this little A B C mystery of mine, why, the great Paul Lancaster can do it while resting! Undoubtedly it will seem so easy to you that my mere telling of it will give you the answer."

Paul, somewhat appeased, shrugged his shoulders.

"I fear I can't keep away from it. Out with it," he urged complacently.

Jason Lancaster drew his chair close. He lowered his voice. The two heads remained close together for half an hour. Just as Jason Lancaster finished, a servant appeared with a newspaper.

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A glaring headline caught their glances. It was the Ardmore murder.

"What did I tell you!" exclaimed Paul. "The wave of crime has come! My absence has become known!"

His uncle read the newspaper account before he replied.

"Now, Paul," he drawled at length, "I don't think you need blame yourself or your absence for what has happened."

Something in his voice startled Paul. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Look!" triumphantly commanded his uncle.

The older man's lean finger pointed to this sentence: "The police have already called in the famous detective, Paul Lancaster, who is now hard at work on the case, and developments are expected hourly."

Uncle Jason grinned.

"Good Lord! What does it mean?" blurted Paul.

Jason Lancaster arose, smiling.

"It must mean," he observed slowly, "that no one knows you are away!"

"Yes, but," objected Paul, "how can I do the work when I am not there?"

"Perhaps," suggested his uncle meaningly,

“you are not the only Lancaster who is clever at disguise!”

“Lorraine!” exclaimed Paul.

For reply Jason Lancaster smiled broadly.

* * * * *

Over and over again Lorraine twisted and turned the tangled evidence. She began to feel that somehow, somewhere, in her first visit to the house of tragedy, something had escaped her. Just what that something was, of course, she could not say. She wondered if her previous connection with the white-robed mysteries had blunted her powers of observation. But surely she had gone over everything with extraordinary care. True, she never before had been on the scene of a crime. That's why it seemed all the more strange since she had managed everything herself. With no conceit, she knew that it was not Paul's unusual cleverness in his "field work" which had made the solution of other mysteries possible for her. Why then was her first out-in-the-open case so baffling? Was it really as extraordinary as it seemed? Was it actually one of those hypothetical murders so perfectly planned and executed that no tangible clew did remain? She wanted something to substantiate those five fatal words. Why, she couldn't say. If only

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she could find something else, even a bit of chalk on a handkerchief!

Lorraine could almost re-enact those last moments of the stricken woman. Her terrible words had come to be an obsession with Lorraine. They persisted in echoing through her mind. They forced themselves upon her attention at the most unexpected moments. Why? Was she becoming morbid? Was she on the verge of a nervous breakdown?

She resolved to interview Dr. Waterman. In the evening she went to him as Paul Lancaster's sister, private secretary and assistant. She attempted no disguise for she feared the professional eye and ear of the medical man; he might detect the fraud of her assumed cold and its attendant whispering.

"Dr. Waterman," she asked, "how could a frail woman, frightened beyond our comprehension, have the strength to cry out as she did?"

The doctor reflected, "It is a curious thing," he said, "what fear will do. Invariably the person stricken is numb, palsied. As he strives to cry out, his vocal cords become paralyzed and will not respond. A nightmare often produces this."

Lorraine nodded. "Unfortunately, a night-

mare can not be held responsible for the dagger plunged into the heart of the murdered woman!"

"Oh, no," answered the doctor quickly, "I was merely trying to give you a recognizable example of numbing fear. Now, when the victim of a nightmare does recover his power of speech, he cries out with frenzy. In other words, his previous inhibition seems to have augmented the strength of his cry."

"You think, then," reasoned Lorraine, "that Miss Ardmore may have finally cried out with just such strength and desperation?"

The doctor considered the point. "It would not be impossible," he said. "How else could she have made herself heard before she died?"

"You said that she died instantly?"

"Yes."

"Then — just before the knife reached her heart — when she saw her murderer — she was first stricken dumb with terror. Then recovering her speech, she shrieked and cried out the words?"

"I have no theory," commented the doctor, "but that would be possible."

"Does it not strike you as peculiar that a desperate person, intent on taking Miss Ardmore's life, should have permitted her to cry

out at such length before silencing her? Would it not seem more like a criminal to drive home the knife just as she opened her lips to cry out?"

This suggestion interested the doctor. "You are eliminating the quality of fear from the murderer," he told her. "The craven who would take an old woman's life might not be bereft of fear, especially if this were his first major crime. It might be that a numbing fear held back the arm from driving the knife quickly. And only Miss Ardmore's cries stung the criminal to belated action."

"Yes," admitted Lorraine, slowly. "I've thought of that possibility. But I wanted a specialist's view on the point. One other question, please."

Dr. Waterman nodded gravely.

"When Miss Ardmore gave her first terrible shriek, what effect would that have on her voice?"

The physician tapped the table lightly. "That would depend upon the strength and desperation of the frightened person. A frail woman filled with mortal fear might have been stirred to a great cry."

"I meant," explained Lorraine, "wouldn't the force expended in such a cry weaken her

throat and make the words which followed hoarse or husky?"

"That," asserted Dr. Waterman, "is a debatable question, depending upon the final desperate strength of the woman. No living person can say."

"The witnesses declare that her words were clear and unmistakable."

"The excited condition of the witnesses may have colored their memories. While the words may have *seemed* clear and distinct, because they were understandable, it does not necessarily hold that they were distinct. Of course, I haven't the slightest idea at what your questions are aimed, Miss Lancaster."

"No," confessed Lorraine, "I phrased them so purposely. I wanted your unbiased, professional judgment. One more question, please. Molly Ardmore states positively that she was in bed when she heard the first shriek. It was only after she had leaped out of bed, put on her kimona, and started for the door, that the incriminating words followed. What explanation have you for this delay? Would not a person in imminent danger of being murdered shriek out the identity of the murderer in one breath with the first cry?"

"That is an interesting point, Miss Lancas-

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ter," the doctor admitted. "Sometimes this might be possible. Again, if a frail aged woman had put every ounce of strength into her first scream for help, mightn't she, from sheer weakness, have paused a few seconds for strength to proceed? The very knowledge that she had a few seconds of life remaining may have nerved her to recover her breath before uttering the accusing words."

"Well, I guess that is all," Lorraine responded dully, as she rose to depart. "Thank you very much, Dr. Waterman."

As she walked slowly to her roadster, she thought half heartedly, "Maybe, after all, the recurrence of those five words has merely become an obsession. Maybe I am getting overtired."

But again and again as she drove homeward, the words persisted in whispering themselves to her significantly. Wearily she drove the roadster into the garage and walked back to the house. She wondered if she were going to fail in her first field case. Why wasn't she willing to accept the theory of Gray that Molly Ardmore was unquestionably guilty? Was it because the girl was so young and appealing? Lorraine knew that beautiful women, cultured women, delicate women, had been convicted of

great crimes. Was it because this Borgia-like character seemed so unusual in Molly Ardmore? Or was it her intuition appealing to her, striving to warn her that she had overlooked some clue?

Resolved to obtain a full night's sleep, if possible, Lorraine retired early. But all night long her dreams pursued her, with the last words of Rebecca Ardmore coming to her over and over.

She came downstairs early the next morning. She turned idly to the first page of the awaiting paper to see what the press was doing on the Ardmore murder. The coroner had rendered his verdict of "Death resulting from stabbing by a person or persons unknown." There was not much new. The old facts were cleverly expanded and embellished with new adjectives.

Glancing slowly over the first page she turned casually to the second. Then she sat very still. This is what she read:

**MYSTERIOUS RED-HAIRED
WOMAN IN WHITE**

The Home of Carol Lansing Entered

Another woman in white entered the residence of Carol Lansing of 35

Denmore Road shortly before midnight last night. After chloroforming him, she bound Mr. Lansing in the same way that Mr. Jeremiah Drift had been tied on Monday night. Besides cutting the curtains to shreds she slashed the red velvet furniture in the reception-room where Mr. Lansing was reading. No other damage was done, nor was anything stolen from the house, and Mr. Lansing is at a loss to explain the reason for this visit.

The same method of entrance was used as in the Drift mystery. A five-inch circle was cut in a distant window in the room. This accounts for Mr. Lansing's inability to hear this curious visitor enter. Strangely enough this woman in white was slender with bright red hair. Mr. Drift's visitor, it will be remembered, was black-haired and portly.

What is this band of mysterious white-robed women who are terrorizing our community? And what is their connection with the Ardmore murder? The police are already investigating this affair. It is about time

that the perpetrators of these outrages were apprehended. Must the house-owners themselves come to the assistance of our protective society?

So the red-haired woman had returned! Sylvia Langdon had not yet been satisfied with the results of her abnormal desire for copy!

Chapter XIV

WHAT THE OLD HOUSE HID

There was a matter-of-fact hum to those six throbbing cylinders which carried Lorraine to the address she sought. While the sinister words of Rebecca Ardmore were still intertwined with this new determination, they were not quite so insistently prominent. She in no way minimized their recession. A startling, fresh development was temporarily holding them in leash.

The broad avenues narrowed. Houses became far apart. The well-groomed smugness of the upper boulevard avenues was fast disappearing. There was a shabby gentility apparent in the houses which now came into view. Lorraine was a bit surprised and this surprise in no wise diminished at sight of the house she sought.

A dilapidated high wall surrounded it. The gate, rusted and sagging, creaked on its hinges as Lorraine opened it. A weed-grown drive led up to the dwelling, set far back from the

road. The grass grew sparsely. Bushes and trees were uncared for. And the rambling house told of years of neglect. The once imposing entrance was pathetically shabby. The paint had long since flaked from the somber gray sides and blinds were missing or broken. There was a bleak, forbidding air about the whole place. It breathed sadness, misfortune. The sleek, brown roadster parked in front was strikingly out of its element.

The caller pulled the bell knob.

A jangling bell sounded through the hall. Lorraine waited more than ample time unanswered. Then she sent the unmusical summons crashing through the stillness again. After a brief wait, the grating noise of rusty bolts rewarded her. The door opened a crack.

It was an unfriendly, dour face that confronted her. The woman was past middle age. Her hair was drawn uncompromisingly taut from her forehead. Her features were gaunt and angular and the large mouth was shut tightly. Shrewd gray eyes peered at Lorraine from under a dome-shaped brow.

"Does Miss Sylvia Langdon live here?"

The woman nodded curtly.

"Please tell her that Miss Lancaster would like to speak with her."

The opening narrowed a bit. An expressionless voice spoke through.

"She's too busy to see any one. She told me to say so."

Lorraine's tone was commanding. She spaced her words impressively.

"Tell — Miss — Langdon — that — Miss — Lancaster — must — see — her — at — once. *Must*, you understand."

The door was banged in her face.

"Humph!" commented Lorraine. "What a strange house for a famous authoress! What a forbidding servant! Certainly there are suggestions here that Sylvia Langdon is down on her luck, report notwithstanding. Why has she chosen such a remote out-of-the-way abode?"

Lorraine knew that writers were reputed to be erratic. But surely the English woman was not seeking society. Rather did it look like seclusion. There was something of alluring mystery about Sylvia Langdon and the place was heavy with it.

The door opened gratingly.

"Miss Langdon will see you," the woman informed her. She waved Lorraine to a closed room at the right of the big entrance hall.

The girl breathed a sigh of relief as she

entered. The room was comfortable; furnished with an air of taste and refinement. Evidently Sylvia Langdon spent much of her time here. There was a plain desk, a typewriter, filing cabinets and a number of books and magazines.

Almost immediately Miss Langdon entered. Lorraine stared at her.

The woman looked positively ill. Her face was haggard and wan, and had aged perceptibly. Her eyes were unusually bright, but it was the brilliancy of nervous strain. There was suffering in every line of her face. It seemed incredible that she could have changed so. What had come over her! Less than ever did she suggest the remorseless marauder, ruthlessly dispoiling houses, chloroforming people "for the experience!"

Listlessly Sylvia Langdon seated herself at her desk, dropping her head heavily on her hands.

"You have seen the papers," she remarked dully.

"Yes —." Lorraine selected her words slowly. "Don't you think that you owe me frankness? Don't you think it is high time that you told me the whole truth?"

"Yes."

Miss Langdon spoke dispiritedly.

The reply was so low, that Lorraine wondered if she had fancied it.

Sylvia Langdon turned to her with an air of pitiful resignation. It was as though her world were crumbling about her ears. There was a desperate, haunted look in her weary eyes. She began with an effort.

“It was all in vain, my visit to you. If only I had waited, you could not have forced the truth from me. Again I can prove my whereabouts last night. That means that I am not the red-haired woman — nor any of them. I made up a plausible story about my quest for copy. It seemed convincing because I had facts, apparent proofs, which only one deeply implicated could possess. I *am* deeply implicated, but I am guilty of nothing except my lies to you.”

A strong suspicion was shaping itself in Lorraine’s mind. Dimly she understood the suffering on the face opposite her.

“I came from England, not to court American popularity and not to change my style. My books are selling well.”

“Yes,” agreed Lorraine, “so the representatives of your publishers told me. That was one flaw in your story.”

Sylvia Langdon merely raised her shoulders.

“I — I am not a finished liar,” she said wearily. “I came here to — try an experiment. The doctors said that a change of scene, the sea voyage, and new air m-m-might help.”

Surely she could not be the victim of intermittent hallucinations! Her face belied such a supposition.

“So I sailed, accompanied only by my faithful old watch-dog, Lizzie, who has long been with me, and — by a maid — so the steamship list read. I let it be known that I had come to work, to study American life. I was said to be retiring. I never entertain here, although once in a while I just have to get away, like that night at Mrs. Madison’s.”

She shuddered, and again the haunted look crept into her eyes.

“No one suspected the true identity of my so-called maid. She is — is — my younger sister, Stella.”

Again Lorraine saw the little button with its engraved S. L.

The tired voice continued. “A serious illness caused Stella’s trouble. Five years ago it — it came. At the beginning, she had spells of violence. Then, for two years, she seemed almost sane. For some months prior to my leaving England, occasional outbreaks occurred. Recall-

ing hopefully those two years, I brought her here. At first, in fact all along, until that terrible Sunday night, she seemed her old self. She was docility itself, talked rationally, in fact, she entirely misled us. You see, I didn't dare have any more servants. But, with the cleverness of a maniac, she was merely biding her time. That night she succeeded in leaving her room, although Lizzie slept on the couch outside her door. We had never locked her in — it had never seemed necessary — and we feared fire or something. We discovered her absence shortly before her return. She was quite matter-of-fact in what she told us. I have never seen her more lucid. She told us plaintively that she couldn't sleep, so went out and sat on the front porch. Finally, she became tired and came in. Quite childishly she returned to bed and fell asleep."

"Didn't she bring anything with her?" questioned Lorraine.

"No. She had hidden everything behind the rose-bushes inside our back-yard. The next night Lizzie took the precaution to move her couch into Stella's room. To our surprise, Stella didn't object at all, merely said she was terribly sleepy and went to bed very early. Lizzie had a severe headache around ten o'clock

or so. But before leaving the room to get medicine she took care to steal up and listen to Stella. The girl was breathing heavily, apparently sound asleep. So Lizzie hurried down to the kitchen, and although she came back almost immediately, Stella had gone. We hastened out of the house, hoping to find her. But she was not there. For the first time a terrible suspicion crossed my mind. *Where had she been the night before?* We searched everywhere futilely. We were helpless. My pride would not let me call in the police. I prayed that she would return safely — ”

Lorraine listened intently. “And when she came back — ?” she prompted.

“She came back a little after two. She wore one of my close-fitting bonnets and her own long mohair coat. This covered up the scantiness of her attire. She had drawn on white stockings and a pair of white tennis shoes. She seemed in high spirits. She was quite frank, almost impish in the way she confided what she had done. That was how I had such an intimate knowledge of the Hartman and Drift cases.”

“What about her bag, the black coat and the other accessories?” questioned Lorraine. “Did these bear out her story?”

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“No, she didn’t have them. She only shook her head and looked cunning when we tried to locate them. We half believed that she was raving. But there was such a connected and convincing air about her story and she showed the papers which she had taken from Mr. Drift’s table. ‘It is the red—the red that sneers at me—taunts me—makes faces at me,’ she told us petulantly. ‘But I have punished the nasty, talking things. You shall punish these with their red, staring eyes,’ she told me appealingly, as she handed the papers over to me. Of course, I quickly agreed and put them away safely.”

“And then?” asked Lorraine.

“For the first time we locked her in her room. Again she made no objections, but she ate a little lunch and seemed willing to sleep. Just at dusk Lizzie entered the room with the tea-tray. But—she was gone!”

Miss Langdon smiled, wanly.

“How?” interrogated Lorraine.

“Her room is over the piazza roof. She had knotted her sheets and pillow-cases together, fastened them at the top of the porch, and let herself down to the ground. Again our wild search disclosed nothing except a small piece of black cloth in a clump of bushes in the rear of

the house. We recognized this as a scrap torn from my long black coat."

"Where did she get it?"

"It would have been easy. I haven't worn it lately, and we were lax in watching her at first. It hadn't seemed at all necessary. But I straightway resolved to get a maid for myself and let Lizzie guard her all the time — when she returned."

"And when was that?"

Sylvia Langdon hesitated pitifully. "I — I will tell you the truth. She never came back until — until early this morning."

"Do you mean," demanded Lorraine slowly, "that she was gone from Tuesday night at dusk until early this Friday morning?"

Miss Langdon's face was pale, but she answered steadily, "Yes."

"And she has confided to you what she did during her absence?"

"No. She is morose and sullen. I have never seen her so before. She will say nothing except, 'I don't know. I have forgotten.'"

Lorraine questioned quickly:

"She was wearing the black coat when she returned?"

"Yes, and about her waist on a white cord was the white bag with all its contents exactly

as she had described. She even wore her red wig."

"What color is her own hair?"

"Black. That was not a disguise."

"Where did she get all these things?"

"We can only surmise. But we think that a maid I was forced to discharge in England before leaving got them for her. We know that this girl went in for shilling shockers and filled Stella's mind with sensational tales."

"And this maid was bribed to procure the things? Your sister had money?"

"We think she must have been bribed with money Stella extracted from my purse. I never suspected it at the time."

"But didn't Lizzie pack the girl's belongings? How could she bring such things here without your knowledge?"

"Oh, we have been such gullible, stupid fools!" moaned Sylvia Langdon. "That white bag was her knitting-bag that she kept stuffed with yarn. Towards the end, before leaving England and on shipboard, she seemed inordinately fond of knitting. We thought it a good sign; it kept her quiet, cheerful, entertained. Only when anyone attempted to take it, did she become fretful. 'It's—it's my play,' she told me. 'It keeps me busy. Can't

Stella have just this!' It seemed such an innocent diversion. Of course, we were taken in. She often went to bed knitting, and slept with the bag beside her. Still, fools that we were, we didn't suspect. I even made her a duplicate bag and had her transfer her precious belongings when one became soiled. The two bags thus made it possible for her to hide one away. But she had never secreted anything from us before to our knowledge. Her misfortune seemed only pitiful, not dangerous."

Miss Langdon paused, with a sigh.

"Yes," agreed Lorraine, "it is all plain now. The slashing of the red—everything was the work of a diseased mind. But the methodical precision of her entrance and everything which led up to her anger against the talking red things entirely misled me. I am a bungling investigator after all! Then your story seemed to substantiate what had been done. Of course, your wrists were weak, your books were selling well and the whole thing was contrary to your personality—"

Lorraine's eyes were kind.

"I was over careful," said the other woman, reflectively.

"And now," said Lorraine, slowly, "your sister has forgotten everything that passed from

Tuesday at sundown until this morning?"

"Yes." The lips merely formed the answer.

"Where could she have been Wednesday night when Rebecca Ardmore was killed!"

Chapter XV

A STARTLING POSSIBILITY

Sylvia only stared at her with dread in her eyes.

“What are you going to do?” she whispered, “now that you know the whole story?”

Lorraine’s answer was long in forthcoming.

“You sought to draw guilt upon yourself by telling me your imaginative tale—even while your sister was still absent. You didn’t know even then where she was.”

“If I had, I shouldn’t have come to you, of course.”

“You saw hints of the mysterious white-robed woman in the newspaper account of the Ardmore murder Wednesday night,” reviewed Lorraine. “And you came before the papers announced the arrest of Molly Ardmore, or told the last words of her aunt.”

“If only I had seen that first, I wouldn’t have complicated matters so,” moaned Sylvia Langdon.

“You are forgetting that you cannot prove

where your sister was that night. You are likewise forgetting the housekeeper's story that she saw a woman in white."

"But I am not forgetting the accusing words of the woman who is dead! Suppose my sister did wander into their yard, suppose the housekeeper did see a woman in the shadows as she said, you are forgetting that my sister in no wise resembles Molly Ardmore. Miss Ardmore couldn't possibly have mistaken her for her niece."

"I shall have to see your sister before I can concede that. Tell me one thing, please. Do you believe that she has really forgotten or that she is merely stubborn?"

"Oh, I don't know, I don't know. But I have never seen her act so strangely before."

Many possibilities flashed through Lorraine's mind. Was the housekeeper's story true? Had Stella Langdon entered the house? Had a sudden homicidal mania seized her? She had been obsessed with *red*. And had something from this Wednesday night's experience half sobered her, leaving her morose and moody? Yet Miss Ardmore's words remained, as incapable, incriminating evidence.

"What are you going to do?" Sylvia repeated.

"I don't know yet," Lorraine admitted. "I shall have to talk with your sister first."

"I suppose so."

Slowly she led the way up the stairs to the rear of the house. Another stairway led down near this point. They stopped before a closed door, and Sylvia tapped lightly. The sour-faced woman responded immediately. She glared at Lorraine suspiciously as the two entered, then locked the door behind them, withdrawing to a window and busying herself with some handiwork.

Lying in bed with her arms above her head, was Stella Langdon. The coal-black hair contrasted sharply with the pillows. Her black eyelashes shaded deep gray eyes, and her complexion was dark. While the features were well-formed, they lacked the delicacy of Sylvia's, though there was a slight resemblance. The eyes with their strange glitter were the only indication of the diseased mind behind them. The arms were rather frail, as were the wrists and hands. But Lorraine was no longer interested in mere wrists. Right well she knew of the phenomenal strength so frequently possessed by the insane. Conversely there were times when they were proportionately weak.

Stella Langdon merely gazed at them sul-

lenly under lowered lids. Sylvia introduced Lorraine casually and seated herself. Lorraine followed her lead.

For a time no one spoke.

"Your sister tells me that you have been on a long journey," began Lorraine at length. "It must be nice to rest now."

The girl simply stared at her.

"You must be tired from your long walk, but it must have been very interesting — all the things you saw — and did —"

Stella was no longer even regarding her. She turned her eyes to the footboard, apparently oblivious of their presence.

"See," said Lorraine, opening her bag, "I, too, have a piece of red chalk." She held out a crimson crayon.

Stella Langdon sat bolt upright in bed, a baleful hate glittering in her eyes. She covered her face with her hands.

"Don't let it jeer at me. I hate what it says. It makes me do things. Please take it away," she wailed.

"I'm sorry," interposed Lorraine quickly, concealing the chalk in her bag again. "It's gone now."

Fearfully the blazing eyes uncovered. Then the girl lay back.

"I thought when I found it that it might be yours," Lorraine explained to her pacifically. "Is it?"

"How do I know!" The voice was dogged.

"I have heard," went on Lorraine, soothingly, "about some of the places you went to and how you punished all the ugly red things. Now I want you to tell me where you went the last time you went away. Did you find some more horrid red things?"

Stella Langdon stared at her cunningly.

"I don't know — I have wholly forgotten — I remember nothing. I'm tired. I want to sleep. Take her away, Sylvia."

Lorraine rose quickly.

"Yes, let's go," she said in a low voice. "Good-bye, Stella, I'll come back and see you again some time when you are rested."

"What do you think now?" Sylvia questioned anxiously, outside the door.

"I don't know," frankly. "Please show me the bag she wore, and the black coat."

Sylvia conducted Lorraine to her own room. From a drawer she brought out the two articles. The bag was a huge affair, shirred at the top. It was strange that it hadn't been noted against the gown. But fear and excitement render people unobserving. With infinite care, Lor-

raine pulled out the various items she had ascribed to it. There were two pairs of white gloves, one pair somewhat soiled, the other showing three spots of paint. But even under a microscope there was no sign of red chalk. Nor did her search reveal the slightest clue within the bag or on either one of the two crumpled handkerchiefs. There was also a nearly empty tube of red paint. But there was no brush. Evidently Stella had smeared the tube right on the wall and the furniture. The glass circles were missing. Probably she had first hidden them in the bag and then disposed of them later.

Next Lorraine examined the coat, comparing it with her black threads. The two were identical.

“Keep these carefully,” she adjured Sylvia. “A great deal may depend upon them — much to help your sister.”

“What are you going to do?” came the persistent question.

The girl detective considered.

“First,” decided Lorraine, “you must place Stella where she will be safe — or rather where people will be safe from her outbreaks. Neither you nor Lizzie can cope with the cunning of a maniac.”

“You — you don’t mean — that I must put her in a mad-house!” demanded Sylvia.

“No,” placated Lorraine, “but she must go where she can be safely guarded by experts in her disease.”

“Oh, but the publicity — everything.” Sylvia wrung her hands.

“Publicity!” There was a faint scorn in Lorraine’s voice. “Perhaps you cannot avoid it — later. But now — I know a quiet little retreat, splendidly managed by capable people, specialists in mental diseases. Three years ago an unfortunate case brought it to my brother’s attention. The management is judicious and discriminating. It seems to understand the stigma unfortunately attached to insanity, and it is sympathetic. Stella may be taken there in comfort, in safety, and in absolute privacy. Think what a relief it will be to you not to have the responsibility of her! You will be free to think connectedly. You may even be able to devise some way that will help her.”

“But must it be known who she is?”

“I’ll leave that to you,” said Lorraine, a bit coldly. “But the only condition under which I will keep this matter quiet for the present, until I am ready to act, is for you to put Stella where she will be safely guarded.”

"But you think you will have to tell about her later?"

"I cannot say at present. I have much yet to do. I must try to find out where she was on Wednesday night. If I find the vestige of a proof that she entered the Ardmore grounds, I shall be forced to make my knowledge known. May be I shall have to anyway."

"What good will it do?" moaned Sylvia. "You know she couldn't possibly be mistaken for Molly Ardmore. Does she resemble her in any way?"

"No," admitted Lorraine candidly. "She does not — without a disguise. But she has been engaged in questionable deeds. I should have to admit her complicity in the other three cases if I proved her presence on the Ardmore lawn the night of the murder. It is but circumstantial evidence, to be sure."

"Suppose you did make such a statement?" Sylvia glanced at her with artfully pretended scorn. "Molly Ardmore is already under arrest because of her aunt's convicting words."

"Incriminating — not convicting," corrected Lorraine.

"But don't you think her guilty?" asked Sylvia in surprise.

Lorraine answered deliberately:

"Guilty? I am not yet prepared to say. Are you?"

Sylvia shrank before Lorraine's direct gaze. "I—I don't know. Oh, I wish I did! If Stella had only been home that night! But the old lady's word—"

"Yes," agreed Lorraine, "those five words have certainly branded Molly Ardmore."

"Suppose, suppose," came Sylvia's hoarse whisper, "you found proof that Stella did wander into the Ardmore grounds. Suppose you even could prove that she cut the hole in the window. Perhaps she just stared through and saw the murder, was frightened and ran away. Wouldn't that half sober her, and make her seem queer and morose?"

"That is merely theorizing," declared Lorraine.

"It is no more theorizing than to say that she entered the house, killed Miss Ardmore and that the woman called her 'Molly!' Just as if she could have made herself up to look like Molly Ardmore whom she never saw! And if a jury, out of sympathy for Molly Ardmore, did convict my sister, they could only send her to an asylum. No one would question her insanity."

"That is true," admitted Lorraine.

"Then wouldn't a sympathetic body of listeners prefer to think it the deed of an insane woman?" doggedly questioned Sylvia. "That is what frightens me so! I'm afraid sympathy and not justice will decide. I am afraid that the Ardmore millions will hire a clever lawyer to prove Stella guilty just because of the other affairs and the housekeeper's story. They might say old Miss Ardmore was crazed by fright — or — or something."

"You may be sure that the Ardmore millions will have to be reckoned with if Molly Ardmore comes to trial," averred Lorraine. "And she swears she isn't guilty."

"While, while Stella says nothing," sighed Sylvia. "Oh, if she would only talk!"

"Yes," agreed Lorraine, "memory is an important thing. "But," she ended significantly, "substantiating evidence is far more vital."

She stood up.

"I cannot go until I know that Stella is safely out of the house. The sooner you carry out your plans the more quickly I can be back at work."

"Why must you wait?" questioned Sylvia. "I promise to attend to the matter immediately."

"Because," Lorraine insisted, "Stella has escaped at least once too often already. I must know where to find her if I should need her."

With unconcealed uneasiness, Sylvia Langdon went about the necessary preparations. With even less enthusiasm she reported the success of her telephoned queries. Relieved that there was to be no halt in the procedure, Lorraine settled herself to await Stella's departure. She became lost in absorbing revision of the whole situation. Motionless she sat, mentally scrutinized every step of her arduous way. She turned every minute bit of her evidence, her theories, into every conceivable shape. Her mind was at white heat. Once a ripple of emotion swept over her face. Then she leaned back absorbed again. What was taking place in that fertile brain? Could she, out of the chaos, evolve some new possibility, however slight?

Suddenly a glow overspread her face. Her eyes were fairly illuminated by the thought behind them. What had caused this quick transformation? What had she glimpsed at last?

Chapter XVI

THE CLUE IN THE GARAGE

With elastic step, the trim figure of Paul Lancaster swung into the roadster waiting at the door. A half smile curved the lips. It was kind of a supercilious, gay smile, as though there were something very pleasant in the air. A tinge of pink replaced the wan color of the cheeks. The eyes were steady, unflinching, unafraid. With a joyful, sympathetic roar, the motor whirled out of the yard and was lost in the city's traffic.

Lorraine smiled gleefully as she noted the tan shoes before service brake and clutch. Paul's wardrobe was such a generous one. The Norfolk tweed which she wore was of the smartest cut and texture. She had spent some time in choosing just the right tie. A soft Panama hat covered the thick chestnut hair which still persisted in waving slightly. The light chamois gloves were a bit warm, but she insisted upon wearing them. It would never do to ignore Paul's fastidious regard for details.

As she swept along the avenue which had carried her to the first glimpse of the murder, she marveled how so slight a thing as sudden inspiration could change her whole attitude. The trees fairly flaunted their cool, shady greenness. The sun was never more golden. And the road, like a glossy ribbon of satin, stretched endlessly before the brown car. To be sure, nothing more than an idea had come to Lorraine. But that was something. Sudden flashes before had illumined seemingly hopeless outlooks.

Once more the roadster crunched over the gravel drive to the house with the ruddy roof. But how different it seemed! It was no longer gruesome. With a quickening sense of sorrow, Lorraine quietly left the car. Gently her finger touched the bell above the solemn black symbol. It gave her a strengthening sense of pity and renewed purpose.

Silently Sally opened the door. She frowned unmistakably, but politely discharged her duties.

"Please tell Miss Barton that Mr. Lancaster wishes to speak to her for a few moments." It was the same whispering voice.

Without a word Sally departed.

Noiselessly Lorraine sauntered over to a seat. Again the housekeeper was slow in coming. But no look of impatience crossed Lorraine's fea-

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tures. In retrospect her mind was reacting vital scenes from the tragedy. And her wits were not playing with mere fancies. An entirely feasible possibility had suggested itself. So absorbed was she that she hardly heard Miss Barton's step.

"Yes?" the voice questioned at her elbow.

The hushed tone no longer filled Lorraine with awe. Pity, with something else, was uppermost.

The slight, well-groomed figure arose with alacrity.

"I am sorry to take more of your time, Miss Barton, but there is some information that I must have from you."

With a sigh of resignation, Miss Barton sat down heavily. She glanced at the business-like note-book uneasily. Lorraine's whispers were answered in slow tones. Frequently the book received additional jottings. There was alertness, decision, in every gesture of the questioner. And strangely enough the housekeeper's face had cleared hopefully. She bent forward eagerly, and seemed to be anxious to hasten the investigation. Once she went hurriedly upstairs. After a time she returned with a piece of paper which Lorraine took quickly. More questions and answers passed between them. It was difficult to say which seemed the more excited.

Then Miss Barton saw the detective to the door. Something in her attitude expressed hope rather than obligation. Thoughtfully she returned to her duties.

With a quick, appraising look, Lorraine's eyes swiftly covered her car as usual. Now her glance detected a flat front tire. She frowned for the first time. Of course she was perfectly able to cope with the situation and there were two mounted spares but her impatience made further delay unwelcome. Ruefully she glanced at her own fastidious figure.

Her perturbation had been seen by the chauffeur who had come from the garage to examine the famous detective's car. The Ardmore driver was wiry-looking with a swarthy skin. His features proclaimed his nationality. This was Giovanni who had been safely at home the night of the murder. With the courtesy of his race, the Italian respectfully touched his cap.

"If you'll back up the side-drive here, sir, I'll change it for you," he said.

Lorraine complied with alacrity. She was forced to stop just outside the garage door as the Ardmore limousine occupied the center of the floor. A miscellany of garage tools lay on a bench near the door.

With skilled hand the chauffeur ran the jack

under the forward axle. He brought out his lug-wrench, pliers and a mallet. A hollow clank sounded as he dropped the tools conveniently in front of the wheel. His agility was almost acrobatic. Lorraine wished she had timed him. While her eyes watched his quick movements, her mind was far away. The sound of the jack as it clicked down reached her ears as though from a distance. Carelessly she watched Giovanni pick up each tool. One by one, he tossed them idly to a point just inside the garage door. He smiled and touched his cap.

Although Lorraine knew that the car was ready and that time was precious, she stood transfixed, staring beyond the garage. Her eyes mirrored amazement, incredulity, and then a swift relief. The glow in her face deepened as she smiled into space. She shifted her shoulders as though a great weight had been lifted from them. Then she jumped into the car, thanking Giovanni in a hoarse whisper. And the whisper was accompanied by a sizable circle of silver.

The chauffeur grinned and touched his cap again.

As Lorraine sped on, she consulted the notebook. During the next few hours, the swift wheels of her motor carried her to many places.

She talked to many people. She radiated energy, vitality. But when her watch told her how long she had been searching, a cloud came to her eyes. And only two items remained on her list. Some of the light disappeared from her face. Then, when the last possibility had been exhausted, the brightness faded.

But again she saw the busy figure of the chauffeur. And again something about it re-awakened hope. Somewhere she had slipped a cog—or a cog had been slipped. She sat idly in the car thinking deeply. After a bit she started back to the red-roofed house. Again she sought Miss Barton. Her quick-voiced queries were resumed. A blank look overspread the housekeeper's face. At first she shook her head firmly. But after a time she returned for a search upstairs. With ill-concealed anxiety, Lorraine paced swiftly back and forth.

The beaming face of Miss Barton was her reward. Delightedly she said something which Lorraine's nimble fingers took down. And all the while the housekeeper was talking with excited gestures. It was the first time she had shown such emotion. She had caught Lorraine's feverishness.

Pausing a moment outside, Lorraine passed quickly to the garage. Giovanni in overalls was

packing the differential of the big car with heavy grease. His streaked face caused Lorraine to smile instinctively. And the memory of the tip moved the Italian to reflect the smile. He listened to her questions respectfully. At first he shook his head, perplexed. Lorraine insisted, eagerly. Again the chauffeur was lost in a brown study. After a bit, his face cleared. He began to talk. Lorraine hung on his every word. Sometimes she would interrupt him with sudden queries, then listen again breathlessly. Giovanni gestured vehemently. His excitement showed in his streaked face.

With a final sigh of relief, Lorraine leaped into the car. Along the way, she bought a paper and consulted the amusement column. The gleam in her eyes told of her success here. The car rolled on for twenty miles.

Lorraine slowed down only when entering the new and noisy city of Duston. The bargain-day traffic congested the streets of the business district. Lorraine passed several moving-picture houses with their lurid facades, their screaming posters. Her glance swept both sides of the street carefully. The second best playhouse announced its attractions generously. The quiet air without the lobby signified that the audience was being held spellbound in the midst of a

matinee performance. The girl in the box-office read a paper-backed novel lazily.

Lorraine drove by the theatre and parked. Then she returned and bought a ticket. A box ticket it was since that was all which remained. The ticket-seller gazed in brazen admiration at the handsome, eager face. Lorraine entered the darkened house. A soft-footed usher conducted her to a seat in a box close to the stage, thrusting a program into her hand.

Three principals occupied the center of the spot-light. From the shadows of the box-curtain, Lorraine studied them carefully. With no little satisfaction she went over her program.

She left her seat in a few moments, returning to the reading girl in the box-office. With a few whispers she succeeded in gaining the manager's ear. Unctuously, he came from behind the scenes and conducted Lorraine to a small office.

Very casually, she began her questions. For some reason, he was evidently flattered by them. He consulted notes and was affability itself. All the while Lorraine's fingers flew over the pages of her notebook.

With a flourish, the manager saw her out.

"Sharp young fellow," his oily voice informed the girl in the box-office.

"That's what! Some class!" she agreed.

With much satisfaction the manager returned to his post. He felt very much pleased with himself and with the mission of his questioner. Comfortably, he recalled his packed house the evening before. That was the first night this offering had appeared and it "had done him proud." And to-day an equally satisfactory audience was witnessing the performance. Added to this came the recent profitable interview. The manager rubbed his hands and chuckled. Fine business!

Meanwhile Lorraine had motored some blocks and passed by a second-rate hotel, which she inspected closely. The exterior had tried to affect the good taste of a first-class house, but had succeeded only in garishness. Two or three flashily attired individuals sprawled in the wicker chairs on the squatty veranda.

By the time she had returned to the big city, she had her plans all formulated. She drove directly to Gray's hotel, but she didn't have to inquire for him. He arose from a seat in the lobby when he recognized the well-known figure. His keen glance noted the return of color and a new poise.

"What is it, Lancaster?" he asked eagerly.

The two stepped to one side. Feigning the

clearing of her throat, Lorraine's familiar whisper responded.

"I want you to motor with me to Duston at eight to-morrow morning."

"Duston?" echoed Gray in surprise.

"Yes, just that. And you'd better slip an automatic into your pocket, along with your steel bracelets."

"Is — is it an accomplice?" queried Gray, excitedly.

"No," came the terse whisper. "*It is the murderer of Rebecca Ardmore!*"

Chapter XVII

UPON WHAT EVIDENCE?

Promptly at eight the brown roadster picked up Gray.

The moment they were off, Gray began to talk. "I don't get your drift."

"No," whispered Lorraine, "you didn't last night and conditions haven't changed."

"Can't you give me a line on your stuff?" persisted Gray. "I confess I don't like it. Molly Ardmore is under arrest for this crime. You know why."

"I am forgetting nothing. Are you anxious to convict Miss Ardmore?"

"Of course not, but I don't want to make a laughing-stock of the force."

"Has Paul Lancaster ever done that?"

"N-no, but —"

Frowning uneasily, Gray sat back. His thoughts were in a maze. For that matter, they had been chaotic since Lancaster had made his startling announcement the night before. No one was infallible. Was it possible that they

were on a wild-goose chase? Well, he would keep the results well under cover. The newspapers would not get any chance to crow over the stupidity of the police!

As they entered the outskirts of Duston, a whisper roused him.

"We will go to police headquarters first. You get a couple of armed plain-clothes men to come out for orders. Of course they know you."

"Sure," shrugged Gray, disgustedly, "they know me."

All his little plans for keeping the matter quiet vanished into thin air. Would they be the laughing-stock of the Duston police as well? The roadster stopped before the police-station. With a 'do-or-die' expression on his face, Gray entered. Quite a pause followed during which Lorraine reviewed her program for the last time.

Two ordinary looking men accompanied Gray to the car.

"Perkins and Smith of the Duston force," introduced Gray. "What Lancaster says goes, you know," he admonished.

"Shoot," said one, rather scornfully taking in the details of the foppish figure at the wheel.

Lorraine muffled her throat, and drew over to

the edge of the car. Her hoarse whisper came.

“You know the hotel at 10 Cary Street?”

“Sure.” Cheap, but straight enough,” answered Perkins.

“I’ll give you plenty of time to get there and get seats in the lobby. Take a couple of newspapers and act like loungers. Get as near the desk as possible. When we come pay no attention to us. But Gray will repeat after the clerk an important room number. As soon as you can, go up to the room singly and hang around outside the door. The hotel people know nothing. When Gray coughs hard, come in with your guns handy. We may need you.”

“Sure thing,” assented Perkins. “What yegg are you after?”

“Oh, you will know soon. You’ll be glad to have a hand in the game.”

Wheeling quickly, the two detectives disappeared.

Quite unflurried Lorraine next instructed Gray. “When we enter the hotel, we’ll go at once to the desk. You ask for the room of Signor Allegretti. If necessary say that his manager sent us to interview him. Repeat the number of the room so that your men will get it. I shall say that we represent the *Star*. We will both take notes, ask questions, and show

great admiration for the Signor's story. But when I drop my pencil, and the courtly Signor stoops to recover it, slip your bracelets on him. I'll keep him covered."

"When do I cough for the two outside," questioned Gray.

"When you go at your man with the handcuffs."

"Your plan listens easy. But why you're suspecting this actor is beyond me."

Without replying, Lorraine started the engine. Slowly they took a circuitous detour to Cary Street. They parked the car safely beyond the curious gaze of any hotel loungers.

"You seem to be dead sure of finding him in his room although it is half past nine," scoffed Gray.

"I've taken pains to learn some of his habits," responded Lorraine as they entered the lobby.

She was relieved to see the two detectives in their chairs. Neither of them paid the slightest heed. A few other loungers were scattered about. The air reeked with tobacco smoke. Controlling a desire to cough, Lorraine followed Gray to the desk.

"Signor Allegretti's room?" inquired Gray casually.

"Number 30, second floor back. Go right

up. He just went up from breakfast a little while ago."

"Number 30," echoed Gray. "Thanks."

Perkins' paper rustled slightly. There was no other sign that he had heard.

They climbed the ugly red-carpeted stairs, now dingy with time. This was made all the more apparent by contrast with the fresh coat of paint on the walls. Every thing was tawdry in the extreme. The same loud carpet led them to room Number 30, off a little corridor in the rear.

"Fine location," commented Gray. "Any curious eyes won't spot them waiting outside the door."

Lorraine tapped lightly.

A voice shouted, "Come in." Its tone was light and sharp.

A dark-faced man in a loud checked suit bowed as they entered. He had been reading a newspaper at a table near the window. He was rather tall and wiry of build, with black and piercing eyes. The cheek-bones were high and the lips thin.

"Nasty attack of bronchitis. Excuse my whisper," began Lorraine, note-book in hand. "We represent the *Star*. I talked with your manager, and he was keen for having us put

over a big news story about you.”

The Italian was visibly flattered.

“Fine, gents,” he bowed with a flourish. “Sit down,” his somewhat sharp voice entreated them.

With easy familiarity Gray pulled his chair near that occupied by the man. Lorraine did likewise.

“What would you like to tell us about yourself?” she suggested.

Signor Allegretti cleared his throat, folded his arms complacently and assumed a dramatic pose. He launched out into an account of his love for the stage, his hopes and aspirations. The two listeners seemed to drink in every word, writing busily the while. Their faces reflected their admiration.

The Italian’s tongue ran on glibly. The two were so appreciative, and heretofore the press had rather ignored him. At last a great newspaper would feature him! Maybe several columns would be devoted to the rise of a new star! Possibly several pictures would embellish the article. Signor Allegretti waxed eloquent and gestured frequently with his flexible wrists and his slim fingers, as Lorraine plied him with questions.

Gray took up his part cleverly to relieve

Lancaster's voice. "How long have you been in this country?"

"Ten years."

"Have you always followed the stage?" asked Lorraine. "It would make so much better copy if you had not."

The man's eyes glittered reminiscently. "Alas, no. I ain't always been so lucky. I first held down a job as mechanic. Then I went into the gas-wagon business."

"Meaning?" questioned Gray.

"Oh, I hung out as chauffeur for a spell. Drove the gay coops of some pretty swell bugs, too."

"What swell people have you been connected with?"

"Oh," was the airy reply, "the Van Hoosens and the de Morgans."

"Got tired of that sort of stuff, I suppose?" drawled Gray.

"Sure, I got enough of that game. Nothing to it. I ain't the kind to be under dog for them high action money bags for long. I finally got a job with a bunch of acrobats in Chicago. I'd always been more or less of a clown. Then a bit of a part was handed me — and here I am, pulling down a fat roll every week," he ended with a slangy twang.

"Big stuff," commented Gray. "Got a picture of yourself, I suppose?"

"Sure." The actor went to a bag, fumbled a bit and brought out a big photograph of himself in evening dress. He sat at the table and scrawled with a flourish, "Yurs Faithfully Luigi Allegretti." With a swagger he handed over the picture. Lorraine put it away carefully.

"A few more questions," she whispered, as the Italian reseated himself, beaming. "Of course Allegretti is a stage name. Would you mind telling your real name?"

Although the actor smiled blandly, he hesitated a bit. "Sure not," he replied gruffly. "Pietro Dondarro. Not much on Allegretti, has it?"

Lorraine's brilliant eyes narrowed a bit. Smilingly she shook her head.

Then her pencil rolled clumsily on the floor, stopping almost at the Signor's feet. As he stooped for it, her hand went to her pocket.

Gray gave a cough and leaped on the stooping figure.

The door opened and the two policemen rushed in with leveled revolvers. Cowed by the numbers of his opponents the Italian did not attempt to struggle. He gazed stupidly at

the hand-cuffs on his wrists — then at Gray.

“W — what in he — ” he began.

The policemen looked at Lorraine.

Her reply was plainly audible to all four.

“Pietro Dondarro — *Ravello*, you are arrested for the murder of Rebecca Ardmore!”

“You’re a damned liar!” he shrilled. “You — you, dirty curs! The old lady’s niece knifed her. The papers have the dope. You’ll get yours! — you — .” He glowered at them.

“Cut that,” commanded Gray. “What next, Lancaster?”

The prisoner started at this name.

“Take him back to headquarters and put him in a safe place. Phone me when you’ve done this. Then I’ll come over and explain.”

“Explain!” snarled the Italian. “You, you damned fool! Don’t you know what the old lady yelled? You ain’t got no proofs on me.”

“Trot him right along,” whispered Lorraine. “I want to interview this room. I’ll be at my office when you call up, preparing for the press the story of the illustrious Signor Allegretti!”

Chapter XVIII

UNMASKED

John Marshall scowled at Gray, who stood before the chief's desk.

"I can't get this new move of Lancaster's," grumbled Marshall, irritably chewing his unlighted cigar. "If he hadn't done A 1 work before, I'd be sure he'd made a bad break. We're all liable to go wrong once in a while, but this is too big a case—too much in the papers about it, to pull any boner if we can help it. How did Lancaster act? Think he could have been taking any dope for that cold that could have made him imagine things?"

Gray shook his head.

"How," demanded the chief with rising anger, "can the arrest of a bum Italian actor explain away the woman's dying words? Tell me that."

Gray shook his head again.

"Search me chief," he answered. "Anyway, he'll be here pretty soon, now."

The chief pounded the desk with a red,

hairy hand. "By God," he muttered, "if his case blows up I'll—"

The big man did not finish his sentence. A light knock, the door opened quickly and on the threshold stood a girl in a long motor coat, dainty white shoes and a close-fitting motor bonnet.

Both Gray and Marshall knew of Lancaster's twin sister. The chief laid his cigar carefully on the edge of the table and heaved himself to his feet.

"Where's Lancaster?" he asked brusquely.

"Sick, as you know," Lorraine's clear contralto replied as she closed the door. "I have come to explain how Pietro Ravello murdered Miss Ardmore." Her voice was quiet and assured. There was nothing theatric about her.

Gray flung a quick glance at her; the chief frowned, watching her narrowly as with groping fingers he felt for his comforting cigar.

"I'll be—" he caught himself just in time. "Lancaster must be out of his head to send a girl to wise us up to the biggest case of the year."

"Why not?" quietly returned Lorraine. "I have all the facts."

Angrily Marshall turned to his telephone.

The girl held up one hand. There was an

air of command in her gesture that halted the irate policeman.

“Don’t,” she said, “he’s—he’s not there!”

“Where *is* he then?” demanded Marshall.

Gray stared at the two in silence. It was all beyond him.

“Out West.”

Marshall’s face paled, then turned an angry red. The veins in his forehead swelled. He banged one big fist on the desk. Then he demanded savagely:

“What do you mean—out West? When did he go?”

“Nearly a week ago,” her clear voice responded serenely.

“Say, young woman, what kind of a game are you putting up?” the chief demanded. “Gray’s been working with Lancaster since Thursday.”

For reply Lorraine quickly threw off her coat, and stepped out of her white linen skirt. She pulled at her bonnet swiftly. The trig figure of Paul Lancaster emerged in smart white flannels.

The two men said not a word. They just stared.

“Of course,” a familiar whisper reminded them, “if you insist that I continue in this

voice —” She nonchalantly picked up the skirt and folded it.

Marshall sat down heavily and chewed his cigar. Suddenly a shrewd light came into his eyes.

“Oh, come now, Lancaster,” he said. “We know that you are a shark at disguise, but this is no time for stage play. What we want to know is why that Italian has been pinched — what you got on him?”

Lorraine’s girlish voice responded, “that is just why I am here, but you seem to require something more. Paul left home four days before the Ardmurder. He wanted a vacation and went away in disguise so no one would know of his absence. When the call came, I took it on. I have been associated with him in all his work, you know.”

There was conviction in the face, the eyes, the voice. Except for a quick glance at the chestnut wig which had come off with the motor-cap, the eyes of the chief never left her face. Gray stood with his feet apart, his face expressionless.

“If you still can’t believe me, here is a letter I received from him this morning.” She drew it from a pocket and placed it on the desk before him.

Marshall recognized the writing and noted the western postmark and date. He swore softly under his breath.

"Now I understand the reason for this crazy arrest," he growled. "Now I understand why we thought Lancaster had slipped! A pretty mess! The Police—a big murder—and a *girl* detective—oh!"

"I think you will find that there has been no bungling. Wouldn't you like to hear the story?" Lorraine's quiet voice recalled him.

Already she had reseated herself, having slipped into her motor-coat and replaced her bonnet.

"*Hear the story;*" rasped the chief, "hear the *story*—" His voice ended in an inarticulate gurgle. Wrath choked him.

"Yes," returned Lorraine quietly, deliberately buttoning her coat, "for it is a true story."

The chief stamped back and forth across the room. Doubt, anger, the dread of impending ridicule in the papers overwhelmed him. He had expected a quick clean up of the case and now he found it was a girl to whom he had entrusted the clearing up of the mystery. Too angry to speak to her he turned to Gray.

"Here is a fine mess. How are we going

to explain the arrest of this Italian! What do you say?"

Gray gazed out of the window before he answered slowly. "The sooner we release him, the better, unless—"

"Unless," prompted Lorraine, "unless I can make him confess. Perhaps you will believe my story if Pietro admits it is true?"

From under his frowning brows, the chief looked at her. He liked nothing better than to call a bluff. This suggestion appealed to him as an expeditious way to clear up the whole bungled affair.

He took down the receiver of his desk 'phone.

"Bring Pietro Ravello to my office," he ordered. Then, turning to Gray, he remarked, satirically, "Miss—er—Lancaster thinks that her ladylike methods will prove superior to the department third-degree."

A frigid silence ensued. Covertly Marshall watched the girl's delicate, high-bred face as they waited. He was beginning to feel less sure of himself but that did not abate his anger.

What Pietro Ravello expected to find in the chief's office was problematical. Actor though he was, he could not dissemble his amazement when he beheld the cloaked girlish

figure. He started slightly as his beady eyes saw the features clearly. Ah! He knew it was that Lancaster, the man who had brought about his arrest disguised as a girl. Pietro recovered from his discomfiture instantly. He swaggered even though he could not understand the feminine garb. And what Pietro Ravello could not understand he feared.

Twice Marshall cleared his throat—and paused. Finally he growled: “Here’s the man. Now come on with your story.”

There was an empty chair four feet from Lorraine’s own. The girl pointed to it. “Take this seat, Signor Ravello,” her clear voice told him.

Pietro stood stock still. He had expected the familiar whisper from the dapper young detective, and he had been too long on the stage not to know instantly that the startling voice was no part of Lancaster’s feminine disguise. But, if that was not Lancaster dressed as a woman who—what—?

Under slitted lids the Italian measured his slender opponent, his mind a snarl of contradictions. The factor of an unknown girl, suddenly and unexpectedly obtruded, was perplexing—distinctly disturbing. What secret knowledge had she brought to the police?

He sat down with theatrical indifference. In that slow motion he was making a big fight to control himself. Then he leaned back jauntily in his chair, crossed one leg over the other and pompously folded his arms. Then he smiled, but he said not a word and his eyes never left the girl's face.

Lorraine was maddeningly deliberate. When she spoke it was in a dull monotone.

"Did you, Signor Ravello, ever know Miss Rebecca Ardmore at any time during her life?"

Pietro glanced at her tranquil face, the unconscious ease of her pose. Everything about her, including her question, was disarming. Besides, not only her attitude but her very tone stamped her a novice in cross examination.

A little sneer curved the Italian's lips. "No, I did not," his thin voice responded.

The sarcasm in his tone was not lost upon the listening chief and Gray. The former shifted uncomfortably, half opened his lips and then shut them again.

But Lorraine's assumed nonchalance was gone. In her place, sat another girl, the very intensity of whose face and figure was in startling contrast to the serenity of her first words.

“Ravello—you lie! Three years ago you were employed as chauffeur by Rebecca Ardmore.”

Her clear, incisive voice came like a ping of an unexpected bullet. And the swiftness of her accusation left the Italian dumbfounded. His weak chin quivered and he rubbed it nervously with his hand until he could summon back his habitual sneer.

“How do you know?” cut in Gray.

Lorraine reached into the generous pocket of her motor-coat. She extracted a stiff piece of cardboard. Without removing her eyes from the Italian’s face she suddenly turned the card over. The elaborately autographed likeness of Signor Allegretti beamed blandly upon them.

“Mr. Normand and Miss Barton have already positively identified this photograph as Miss Ardmore’s former chauffeur. And, please,” she requested, “reserve any further questions until I have finished.”

The prisoner showed not the flicker of an eyelash.

Her quiet, compelling voice resumed, “You, Pietro Ravello, failed to satisfy Miss Ardmore. She was forced to discharge you without recommendations at the end of—”

Pietro leaned forward. His attitude was like one listening for the verdict of a jury whose foreman has just risen to speak.

“ — three months. You asked to see her and explain. She listened, but refused to accept your explanation of why you stole that money. Then you angrily protested, and she finally had to have you put out of the room. You were in a rage and left vowing vengeance on her and her class in general. No one knew what became of you. In fact, the incident was wholly forgotten. Other servants had been discharged and had left angrily.”

Pietro half rose from his chair. There was a strained intensity in his harsh voice.

“ That ain't nothin' but wind — hot air! If you didn't make that up out of old woman gossip, then the servants have been stuffin' you — you ain't got no proofs! Them is just so many words. You can't throw a scare into me. You ain't got nothin' on me — ”

Still the arresting tones of this amazing girl swung on, entirely ignoring this voluble denial. “ You went from bad to worse, you couldn't get a job without recommendations. You nursed that grudge until, even after you succeeded on the stage, your hatred and envy of all Miss Ardmores typified filled you with an

unreasoning mania. You were clever, but, for all your diabolical plotting, there remain the terrible, incredible words of Miss Rebecca. And, like the voice of some lurking judgment, they will send you to your just punishment. *You cannot escape those last words.* In them your brutal cunning has overreached itself."

Pietro Ravello moistened his underlip. His shifty glance dropped to the floor, but a vein in his corded throat began to quiver. No one but Lorraine saw this.

"Anyone could have read the newspaper account of the mysterious woman who visited Jeremiah Drift Monday night. Anyone could have profited by that suggestion. And some one did. That some one was you, Ravello."

A second cord in the Italian's throat began to throb. As though drawn by some irresistible fascination his narrow, black eyes quivered and came back to the girl's white, intense face. Her eyes were brilliant and, in their mysterious dark depths, there seemed to the watching prisoner a knowledge that appalled him.

Lorraine held his shifting glance. She drove home her next words.

"With fiendish cunning, the cunning of the smart criminal, you recognized your chance. You had long nursed your wrath. For months,

yes, for many months had you been planning the other details and only waiting your opportunity to be revenged on Miss Ardmore. This lady in white gave you the cue to act. It could not have been more propitious —”

Pietro leaped to his feet.

“You’re a liar!” his voice squealed. “Y — yo — you — ou —” The words ended in a gurgle.

“Sit down!” rapped Gray, putting his hand in his pocket.

Cowed by this familiar gesture, the prisoner sank back quickly into his chair.

Marshall no longer drummed on the desk. His face was nearly as intense as Lorraine’s own. He sat on the extreme edge of his chair, bent forward as though he feared to miss a word or move.

“Draped in white, you crept into the Ardmore grounds and cut the four-inch circle in the library window. This was the first slip on your part. The papers had not stated the size of the circle in the Drift case which happened to be *five* inches.”

A little shiver shook the listening Italian. It was not lost upon Gray or the chief.

“You doubtless carried a weapon of your own. But, as you crept along in the darkened

library, your gloved hands touched the paper-knife on the table. You grasped this chance quickly."

Lorraine's voice had become vibrant, forceful. She held her auditors spellbound. Pietro Ravello stared at her glowing face as though he beheld some fearful apparition which congealed both thought and action.

"In your rubber-soled shoes, you crept to the library door and listened."

At these words, the narrow eyes of the Italian began to widen. He looked beyond Lorraine and there was a peculiar fixity in his gaze.

She swept on relentlessly. "The house was silent. As you peered through, the shaft of light assured you that Miss Ardmore still read in her accustomed seat in the next room. Stealthily you poised yourself in readiness, leaving the library door ajar for a quick retreat. With one catlike step you stood in the shadow just outside the path of light."

Lorraine's voice sank to a chilling impressiveness.

Pietro Ravello sat like a man oblivious to time and place. His eyes had the wide, staring rigidity of a sleepwalker.

"Inch by inch, you crept in. You stood on

the threshold. The slightly deaf woman did not hear you, but she felt your presence. She glanced up. She saw your face contorted with hate. She read the murder in your eyes. She saw what you held in your hand as you stood before her."

Pietro Ravello's fingers clasped and unclasped spasmodically. Beads of moisture stood on his forehead. He drew a sharp, hissing breath. The sound suggested a serpent about to strike.

Gray quietly advanced within reach of the prisoner. No one else seemed to notice this instinctive movement.

"The aged woman was dumb with horror. Her vocal cords were paralyzed with fright. Just as you raised your arm, her strength came back to her. In desperation, she uttered one blood-curdling shriek even as the swift stiletto found her heart and forever silenced her."

All unconsciously Pietro Ravello checked a motion his hands made to cover his ears.

"With all the litheness and expertness of your juggling skill, you flung the knife unerringly with just enough force to pierce her heart. The next instant your gloved fingers pulled from your pocket a half stick of red chalk—you didn't know the Drift intruder

had used oil-paint! Bending forward — never entering the room — you hastily scratched three crimson crosses.”

Again Pietro’s long, clawlike hands made a spasmodic movement towards his face. Then he controlled himself with a shiver.

“You flung the chalk from you — I found it later behind a little picture near by.”

Gray could not conceal the surprise in his face.

“And, —” her voice thrilled as it approached its climax, “— even as you threw the crayon you played your master stroke. In a high falsetto voice, you shieked with startling mimicry, ‘*Molly, Molly, don’t knife me!*’”

Pietro Ravello uttered a long terrified cry. It was more like the howl of a hound than the voice of a human being. His twitching hands were stretched, palms outward, towards Lorraine. Convulsive shivers shook his body. His face, for all its swarthy hue, became the color of clay; his eyes stared at the girl wildly and his lips worked horribly.

“You — you — she-devil!” his voice shrilled in a high falsetto. “You seen me — you dogged me there — you know it all — yes, yes — yes —” his voice rose to a thin scream “— *I done it — I confess!*”

Chapter XIX

THE ONLY CLUE

"Fear is a powerful factor in bringing out the truth," observed Marshall, after Ravello had been taken back to his cell.

"Yes," replied Lorraine thoughtfully, "a dramatic presentation of the scene as it must have been was vivid enough to penetrate Pietro's fancied security. He believed that no one on earth but some unseen witness could give a logical recital of the crime as he had planned it, fostered it and enacted it. His studied mind failed to recognize the profound factors which confronted him, those inescapable links in the chain of evidence. His whole conception of life is based upon craft and cunning, upon the obvious things."

A look of admiration swept over the chief's face.

"Yes," he admitted, "your methods were absolutely beyond the Italian's comprehension. And I must confess that they are beyond my own as well. I certainly offer you an apology.

I never have been quite so staggered in my life. And if you could take the wind out of my sails so completely I can dimly comprehend the effect your words must have had upon that guilty man. Now that we have his signed confession, won't you satisfy our curiosity as to how you could ever imagine the details so accurately?"

"Yes," chimed in Gray, who had been curbing his impatience for some time, "tell us how you happened to hit upon this Italian. How did you know he had been the Ardmore chauffeur? And how was he able to escape so quickly without leaving any tracks?"

"One question at a time," smiled Lorraine, quite ready to gratify their desire for all the details. "Pietro had to work quickly, of course. It needed but one step to take him into the shadows beyond the shaft of light. Another, and he was behind the library door left slightly open. And, as Molly Ardmore opened her door to see the light before her aunt's room Pietro was gliding through the window onto the piazza. When Mr. Normand opened his door, Pietro was running towards the first tree at the corner of the house. Here it was that the sleepless housekeeper came to the window just in time to see the white-robed

figure in the shadow of the tree. As she watched the white turned black; Pietro had deftly dropped his white disguise and put it out of sight. From tree to tree he stole until he came to the high iron fence. With acrobatic agility he took but a moment to climb it. A supple spring and he leaped clear of the hedge, landing lightly on the sidewalk. And a pitiless morning shower obliterated any possible trace of his rubber-soled shoes.

Marshall's face beamed, but Gray was still frowning in perplexity.

"But if he was discharged three years ago, how could he have known that Miss Molly had so recently taken the downstairs room near her aunt? How could he plan on her arriving first on the scene of the crime?"

"Pietro learned from Giovanni, the present chauffeur, of Miss Molly's recent change. His cunning mind quickly grasped the significance of this move. He knew from her habits as well as from the nearness of her room that she would get there first. He also remembered that Mr. Normand slept like a log and was dense and slow to act. Maybe he didn't first plan to incriminate the girl, but the chance was too good. It made his safety doubly secure."

"But how," persisted Gray, "did Pietro get

this important information from Giovanni?"

"That's easy. When Signor Allegretti's show was staged at the South End—in the Alhambra—Giovanni attended the performance one night. Manager Cassatri of the Alhambra happens to be distantly related to Giovanni's family. He frequently acknowledges this kinship by giving them free tickets. So, on last Monday night, Giovanni went. He liked the show and thought the Signor wonderful. He recognized him as an Italian and told his relative-manager that he'd like to meet the star after the show. Then he and a few other privileged ones attended a little gathering in one of the all-night restaurants afterwards. Giovanni doesn't know how he disclosed that he is a chauffeur, but somehow he did. He says he doesn't remember saying for whom he worked, but he must have told that also. Soon he was flattered by the attention of the Signor. Then the Signor rambled on. He says that while the others were busy with their drinks, the Signor regaled him with reminiscences of Rome—they both came from that district. The actor confided that he was greatly interested in houses, describing his old home outside of Rome with its columns and courtyard and everything. Giovanni was more

about American dwellings. He wondered about the rooms of the Ardmore house. By degrees and by clever questioning, he learned where the members of the family slept, all the time rattling on about Italian rooms. He learned that the young niece of Giovanni's employer had recently taken a room on the first floor, but that there had been practically no other changes during the last few years. He pressed cigars and wine on the young chauffeur and appeared to be a delightful sort of a chap."

"Why didn't Giovanni recall this interesting conversation?" asked Gray.

"He did. That's how I know it."

"I mean at first."

"Because we proved that Giovanni was at his own home the night of the murder. We eliminated him from cross-examination. Besides, even later he had difficulty in remembering the important facts, so ingeniously had the Italian concealed what he sought to learn."

"How, then, did you happen to question Giovanni?"

"I knew," responded Lorraine significantly, "that I must have overlooked something, somewhere. Finally I went back and questioned the housekeeper. I asked her for the names

and addresses of any servants who had been discharged within the last five years or so. The first list yielded nothing. I was thoroughly discouraged. Still I wouldn't give in. I went back a second time and insisted that there must have been an oversight. I hinted at an Italian possibly. Then Miss Barton recalled Pietro Ravello and became greatly excited when she remembered his angry departure. He had been there so short a time that she had absolutely forgotten him."

"Doesn't it seem rather fortuitous that you should have hit upon an Italian?" inquired Gray.

"No. Facts bore me out in my supposition."

"And these facts?" he questioned eagerly.

Marshall was following interrogation and answer earnestly.

"A trivial incident put me on the right track. I had a flat tire when I came out of the Ardmore house yesterday. Giovanni skillfully changed it for me, after I had backed up to the garage door. When he finished making the change, he picked up each tool and pitched it expertly back towards the garage, a distance of over ten feet. The lug-wrench caught in the ground for the briefest instant, then fell over.

Instantly the dexterous way he had flung those tools suggested to me how Miss Ardmore might have been murdered. If an untrained mechanic could throw so unerringly, what couldn't a flexible, trained wrist do? The assailant had probably never entered the room — Miss Ardmore's chair was not eight feet from the door. He could have stood on or outside the threshold and thrown the knife like a juggler. As a rule only an Italian is so expert in pitching daggers and stiletos! That would explain too why it barely pierced her heart. Had he stood over her, he would have plunged it to the hilt — we wasted so much time on a weak wrist!"

"Did he plan to make it seem like the light blow of a woman — of Miss Molly, for example?"

"Probably. Pietro is diabolically clever. He knew that nothing could make his revenge sweeter than to hurt the person most loved by Miss Rebecca. He gloated as he thought how his revenge would pursue her even after death. He saw how his fancied injustice, his cherished and nurtured grudge, would wring out the last drop of satiation. It became an obsession with him. Masterly planner that he was — arrant coward likewise — he wanted to

make his innocence appear doubly secure. With such terrible evidence as the dying words of an old woman ringing through the house, he knew the result. And lest his carefully laid plans might fail somewhere, he assumed the role of the woman in white. Everyone in the house would doubtless know the story of the Drift intruder. Should he by some unforeseen mischance be seen by any member of the household, he knew that a story of a mysterious woman in the face of the aunt's supposed dying words would appear like the merest trumped-up fiction."

Marshall nodded briefly. "I follow you in your reasoning everywhere, except on the last words of the murdered woman. But what I don't get is, how on earth you should have imagined that Miss Ardmore might not have uttered them?"

"First, I was unable to explain satisfactorily to myself that pause between her first shriek and her last words. Miss Molly definitely stated that she heard the *shriek* while in bed. Not until she had had time to leap out, put on her kimona, and start for the door, did the *words* follow. That indicates a lapse of some seconds. I couldn't reconcile it. An old woman faces a murderer. The intruder's in-

tent is plain. She sees the knife. She knows that her time is limited. At first she tries to shriek but her voice fails her. The eyes watching her note her every move. Possibly her fear communicates itself to the waiting arm. Then, as she recovers speech and gives a terrible, warning cry, her voice rouses the murderer. I could not explain why, if her assassin permitted her to cry out, he didn't plunge home the knife *before* she uttered the incriminating words.

“If Molly Ardmore had been fiendish enough to plan such a thing, had actually hesitated through fear at first, certainly her aunt's shriek would have recalled her to swift action, would have nerved her to strike before her victim had time to shriek again. At first, I tried to cover this point by judging Molly Ardmore to be guilty. Suppose it were her first crime. Wouldn't she have stood powerless to act for the briefest moment while her aunt was helpless with fear? Wouldn't she, terrorized, have heard the shriek, have seen her aunt's whole effort expended in the one cry? Would the intervening second explain Miss Rebecca's gasping for breath and the strength to utter the incriminating words, while her guilty niece watched her fascinated, powerless to strike?

Even my consultation with a specialist relative to the psychology of fear did not entirely convince me. At this point I was stumped. I thought this last might explain the seconds between. But as I went over and over everything, it didn't ring true. It didn't seem right. What then was the real explanation?

"Only yesterday morning did the startling truth come to me. Then I *knew* — I was positive that some one else had cried out the words. Another thing which had impressed me was the fact that the words were clear, unmistakable, not hoarsened by the effort of the previous cry and by the fear which gripped her. I went over everything again and again. I recast Miss Ardmore's last moments — this time with another before her. He flings the knife which reaches her heart almost the instant her shriek dies on her lips. Then, cleverly mimicing her voice, he cries out the words before making his escape. *I knew I had the real explanation!*"

"Then why didn't you believe the house-keeper's story? If Miss Molly didn't do it, why didn't you think that the mysterious woman in white was the guilty one?" demanded Gray.

For a moment Lorraine hesitated. "I — I couldn't get by an amazing thing in those last five words — a thing which had heretofore

escaped me. And the words kept coming back persistently."

"What was that?" questioned Marshall.

"Yes," agreed Gray, "tell us what there was in five words, recognized as the voice of Miss Ardmore, which should suggest some one else — a murderous chauffeur, for example, an agile Italian."

"I did not at first know of the chauffeur, the Italian and his anger towards Miss Rebecca. I merely knew that it was entirely probable that some one other than Miss Ardmore cried out the words, both to incriminate Miss Molly and to cover himself."

"And what was there in these five words which so impressed you?"

"Just this — Miss Rebecca Ardmore was a woman of education and refinement. She is the author of several books and has a reputation for scholarly, finished English. All her life she has lived among cultured people in the most refined atmosphere —"

"But what has all this to do with my question?" persisted Gray. "What made you think that Miss Ardmore didn't utter those words?"

Lorraine stood up. Her eyes were ablaze. "Because," her voice rang out, "because, such a woman would never have spoken those words!

She never would have used the word *knife* — ‘*Don’t knife me.*’ Those are the words of the street, of an uncultured person, a person accustomed to slang. Rebecca Ardmore died true to form — a thoroughbred. Had she uttered any words at all she would have said, ‘Molly, Molly, don’t hurt me,’ or ‘don’t kill me.’ At the moment of direst peril, she could not have departed from the habit of long years.”

The perfect tribute followed her dramatic words. There was a speaking silence. She saw the face of Marshall amazed, enlightened. She saw Gray wallowing through doubt to astonishment. She waited confidently.

“How — how do you know?” stammered Gray slowly.

“I am a student of psychology. I understand the result of habit. I know how a certain type reacts under terrible stress. I know that had a gamin of the streets been in Miss Ardmore’s chair — true to type, to habit, to environment — his deadly fear would have expressed itself in slang or oaths. Is that not true, Mr. Marshall?”

The chief folded his arms deliberately. His powerful face was tense with thought. He raised his head and glanced at her.

"Yes, Miss Lancaster," he agreed. "I've heard them squeal many times when cornered by the police. Yes, it is true, absolutely true. You — you —" he stammered in his embarrassment, "you put your finger on the only weak point in Pietro Ravello's nearly perfect plan. All he lacked was education."

"And, Mr. Gray," queried Lorraine, "do you recall anything during our interview with Pietro which further substantiates this point?"

He shook his head.

"When you slipped the handcuffs on him you caught him off his guard. He was confident, however, that we could prove nothing. He said, 'The old lady's niece *knifed* her.' From force of habit, the words came naturally to his lips. Do you recall them, Mr. Gray?"

"Yes, I remember now. I noticed it at the time."

"He is a craven and a coward," the chief agreed "and he planned too well. The noose he fashioned for Molly Ardmores's neck will be drawn around his own throat — I'm glad the girl didn't do it."

Gray nodded. "It's a big thing, the most blind case I remember. Think of that devil with his thin, sharp voice, mimicing the old lady so they all recognized her tone!"

“Excitement and imagination are powerful factors at such a time,” commented Lorraine soberly. “It was a remarkably planned thing, an almost perfect crime. Yet the master criminal no more exists than the infallible detective.”

Chapter XX

THE LAST ACT

It was, however, an awkward situation for the police department. A mere woman had run down the clever criminal in this clueless Ardmore murder! By some subtle sixth sense — intuition — psycho-analysis — call it what you will — she had succeeded in putting her finger on one word! What then! Would the police want to acknowledge that, in Paul Lancaster's absence, a girl had put over this amazing thing? What would be the attitude of the newspapers — of the people at large?

Unconsciously Gray voiced an answer to his superior's disquieting thoughts.

"The newspapers will have a sensation, all right. Not only in the real murderer but in the girl detective. It's a live yarn, and will be a nine days' wonder. You'll become famous over night, Miss Lancaster. And you'll be interviewed and photographed more than a grand opera prima-donna."

"Please don't," begged Lorraine. "It's the

work I love, not the publicity. I — I — Won't there be any way out of it?"

"How would it do for me to wire Lancaster?" deliberated Marshall.

"Yes, please do," urged Lorraine. "I hardly know what to say."

Quickly she wrote an address and handed it to the chief.

"Oho," he smiled, "still at his old tricks, I see. Well, Miss Lancaster," he went on, "you've certainly done your name proud. If you hadn't delivered the goods, I'd never have believed it possible. You must have quite an inside knowledge of many of your brother's cases."

"All," corrected Lorraine, laconically.

"I had no idea," apologized the chief, his voice falling off for lack of words. "You l-l-like it?" he stammered, "— this sort of thing?"

"Like it!" Lorraine's voice repeated scornfully. "Why, I *love* it. It's the most wonderful calling, that which protects humanity. And the only way that society — that people — may rest in peace and security is by the adequate, thorough running-down of every crime. Misdeeds exist only because they are permitted to do so. The tighter the investigations are drawn

about each crime, the more often the perpetrators are brought to justice, the sooner crime will be blotted out."

Marshall nodded emphatically.

"However clever the criminal, he is the paltriest of cowards," went on Lorraine. "He dares only because he thinks that he has covered his tracks and so can not be made to pay the price. You understand that I am speaking only of the coldly plotted misdeed. There is seldom any mystery about the thing done in sudden anger, inspired by real or fancied wrongs."

Her listeners leaned forward respectfully.

"Under this head comes the social or political fanatic, who believes he is called upon to destroy a tyrant. The person with this distorted view considers himself a martyr to some cause and takes no pains to conceal his act. While you of necessity deal with all classes, the criminal investigator is called in only for those coldly calculated crimes which the professional criminal has put through. Like the work! I love it."

Marshall was pleased with this outburst. It was flattering to his department to be considered the protectors of humanity. Too often the police were set down as a "bunch of rough-

necks," just waiting for an opportunity to "run some one in." Certainly they were no bullying guardians of the law. "Protectors of humanity" the girl had called them.

"You have the spirit of the real detective, Miss Lancaster," he declared. "It is rare. And I am not so sure — but that — er — a lady with excellent training, an apprentice to a real master, would be invaluable in this line."

A little smile curved Lorraine's lips. This was occasioned by the lingering effigy of Paul's fancied accomplishments.

From the window, the two policemen watched the slight figure slip lithely behind the wheel. As the sleek brown roadster shuttled through the traffic, Marshall voiced a single observation.

"I'm not so sure but that she knows more than that brother of hers."

Gray vouchsafed no reply.

After Lorraine had stopped at the house and resumed her own clothes, she motored towards that retreat which was really an asylum for Sylvia Langdon's pride. To her, Sylvia was the most tragic figure in the whole affair. She appreciated the sensitiveness of the woman, and she realized how greatly she had felt that misfortune which she had concealed so somberly.

Strange how closely fame and misfortune had traveled with her!

Again the severe visaged Lizzie responded, inviting her in.

Sylvia Langdon was long in coming. Finally, a slight rustle told of her approach. As the woman stood framed in the doorway, her soft rose dress bringing out her elusive grace, Lorraine thought of one of Burne-Jones' wraithlike ladies. She breathed of tragedy and high fortune blended.

Lorraine's sensitive face was transformed by a sudden, flashing beauty. Tenderness and sympathy radiated from it.

Sylvia Langdon stood fluttering like a butterfly.

"What is it?" she asked eagerly.

Lorraine smiled.

"Good news!" the clear voice rang out. "Your sister did not go there Wednesday night!"

Crumpling weakly into a chair, Sylvia covered her face with her hands, but no sound followed. After a while, she raised her eyes. "You are sure?"

"Yes," Lorraine told her, "positive. The real murderer has confessed."

"Molly Ardmore?" whispered Sylvia.

For answer Lorraine quickly sketched the facts.

“And now,” she added, nodding towards the motor, “the fly-away steed is waiting to take you out for a long spin.”

Sylvia smiled whimsically, though she hesitated at first.

Some time later when the swift car was far out in the country, she confided, “Do you know, Stella really likes it over there, so I shall leave her for the present.”

Lorraine smiled brightly. “Isn’t that splendid! Now, don’t you worry about those expeditions of hers,” she admonished. “I feel sure that I can make satisfactory explanations without mentioning any names.

“But the police are on the Lansing case,” worried Sylvia.

“To be sure. But when I pay the Lansings a visit, offer reparation, and state the irresponsibility of the intruder, the affair will be dropped without the police being any the wiser. With them it will remain one of those unsolved mysteries.”

“You believe it?” demanded Sylvia hopefully.

“Indeed I do. And about that thousand,” continued Lorraine. “I want you to under-

stand that it no longer exists. You helped me far more than I helped you. We are now more than quits."

Although Sylvia demurred, Lorraine was firm.

"If I tried to tell you what I thought of you, my words would be so inadequate," breathed Sylvia earnestly. "It must be splendid to do so much good."

"It is great to untangle chaos," exulted Lorraine.

* * * * *

When Marshall wired to Lemuel Paul, his questions were barbed and unmistakable. Back over the wires came this message:

Give her all credit.

Paul Lancaster.

This telegram let loose the biggest sensation the city had experienced in years. A double-headed sensation fell to the hungry press. Extra followed extra, and editions sold faster than they could be printed. The extraordinary arrest of the Italian actor for the Ardmore murder; the innocent victim of circumstances, Molly Ardmore; and last but by no means least, the dramatic appearance of a remarkable girl detective, took the city by storm. Such a series of

surprises made the public gasp. It was more than a nine days' wonder!

Far out West, Jason Lancaster and his nephew bought stacks of newspapers. They read everything relating to the case on which they could lay their hands. But all the while, Jason Lancaster was ominously quiet. Paul read thoughtfully, abstractedly.

Finally, the older man broke the silence.

"Well, Paul," he drawled, "feeling sort of cheated, are you?"

"No-o," answered Paul idly, "she has earned it, all right. And, Uncle Jason, I don't mind confessing that it was a streak of luck that brought me out here."

"Think so?"

"I do," he responded slowly. "Frankly, I had begun to suspect that most of my ideas about mystery-solving were borrowed from Lorraine. Now I know it. I'm going to follow up my telegram with a full confession to Marshall. I'm going to say flatly that Lorraine has been responsible for practically all the successes attributed to me. I'm going to tell him that she is the real mystery-solver."

"Good for you!" approved his uncle. "'Pears like you are finally coming to your senses! I've had my pretty strong suspicions

of the truth for some time. And a little trip across the states didn't mean anything to me, but I hoped it might mean something to you — and to Lorraine. How did you happen to tumble to the truth?"

Paul hesitated perceptibly.

"Guess that little fool mystery of mine has been sort of an eye-opener to you, hasn't it?"

The young man shifted a bit, but still said nothing.

His uncle went on. "I don't believe you have quite realized, until lately, just how much Lorraine did do. But it certainly did make me sick to see you so pompously sailing around under false colors. I saw how flattered you were with what people said you did, but that you really didn't like to think out hard problems. You just liked to trot around, wear swell clothes, assume a disguise now and then, and *play* at being the great detective — then bring the facts home for Lorraine to solve. So I made up my mind that I'd take you in hand and show you a few things. So I brought you back with me intending to put one over on you. I made up a cock-and-bull story about that little mystery here, and passed it over for the wise Paul Lancaster to solve. But anyone would know that it was your first unassisted case from the fool

way you went about it. And to date you haven't unraveled a single thread from what I made up out of whole cloth—shoddy at that! You didn't even see through my transparent little game. I don't know how long you might have puttered away at it if it hadn't been for this Ardmore murder, and the show-down!"

There was a long silence. Paul squared his shoulders. Some of the bigness of the vast spaces had begun to seep through and rouse his dormant character. It lent strength to the erstwhile indecisive lines in his face. He was like one who had been humanely operated upon just in time to eradicate a sapping disease.

"What you say is true," he admitted frankly, "absolutely true. And to tell the truth, Uncle Jason, it will afford me a mighty relief to place the credit of the mystery-solving—where it belongs. I'm not all cad even if I have seemed to be one. Let Lorraine assume the credit. She'd had the responsibility. She is keen for that sort of thing, and has always done the major part of the work."

"What are you going to do?"

There was another silence, then Paul arose. His slight frame seemed to tower with sudden dignity.

"Going to do, Uncle Jason? Why, I'm

going back to Lorraine and ask her for a plain, every-day J-O-B. When Lorraine Lancaster, the ablest detective in the world, assumes her true position," he smiled suddenly, "she may need an office-boy or mechanician or some one to do the routine work while she delves into the important phases of the affair. If I can be of service in saving her, in running down tiring bits of information which must be verified, maybe, maybe I won't be such rotten timber in the firm after all. What do you think, Uncle Jason?" There was an earnest eagerness in his query.

Jason Lancaster looked far beyond the anxious questioner towards his great fields of alfalfa.

"The spirit of the West," he whispered to himself. But to Paul he said simply, "Think? Why I *know* that you can help in the great puzzle of mystery-solving. And I know Lorraine is too generous to underestimate any service you can render. Stay here in the West with me a while longer. It will make you grow. It will teach you to estimate men, not by the cut of their clothes or by the make of their cars, but by the staunchness of their character and the resolution of their hearts. Then go back to the opportunity which is waiting for you and help Lorraine the very best you can."

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